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Nationalism and War:

Georgia in the 1990s

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Abstract

The causes and effects of nationalism in the violent conflicts within the former Soviet space have long been a topic of hot debate among scholars of social sciences. In ethnically heterogeneous places like the Balkans and the Caucasus, many tend to blame the outbreak of military confrontations on the intrinsic cultural differences between the different ethnic groups. In this dissertation, however, I argue against this notion and try to demonstrate that labelling these conflicts as 'ethnic' is mistaken altogether. The question of why inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts turned violent in Georgia in early 1990s is intrinsically linked to how ethnicity has been constructed, institutionalised, and politicised during Soviet rule. Based on observation of these events and on interviews conducted with the political and military elite of Georgia, as well as close examination of the available documentary material and other sources in Georgian, Russian, and English languages, I further outline three major factors that have played a decisive role in linking nationalism and war in the case of Georgia: institutions, elites, and the Russia factor.

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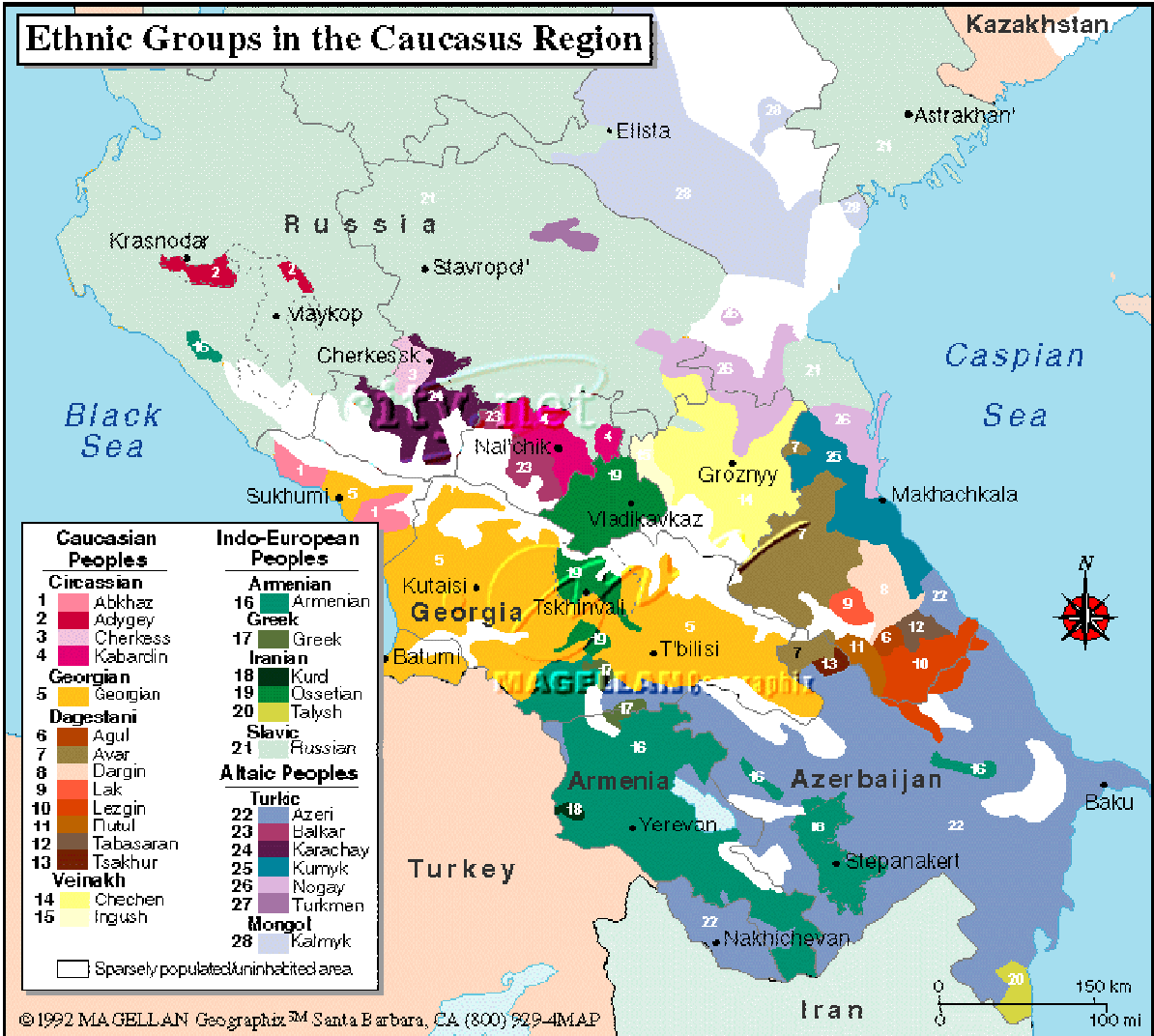- Institutionalising Ethnicity in Georgia

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Ethnic Groups in the Caucasus Region

Caucasian Peoples

Circassian
1 Abkhaz
2 Adygey
3 Cherkess
4 Kabardin

Georgian
5 Georgian

Dagestani
6 Agul
7 Avar
8 Dargin
9 Lak
10 Lezgin
11 Rutul
12 Tabasaran
13 Tsakhur

Veinakh
14 Chechen
15 Ingush

Indo-European Peoples

Armenian
16 Armenian

Greek
17 Greek

Iranian
18 Kurd
19 Ossetian
20 Talysh

Slavic
21 Russian

Altaic Peoples

Turkic
22 Azeri
23 Balkar
24 Karachay
25 Kumyk
26 Nogay
27 Turkmen

Mongol
28 Kalmyk

☐ Sparsely populated/uninhabited area

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Nationalism and War

Chapter I – Introduction

War has always been a part of human history, therefore, the question of why people, often living peacefully side by side for significant periods of times, start killing each other has always been relevant. From the eighteenth century onwards, when nationalism gradually started to enter public discourse, scholars and analysts have often associated it with violence and destruction. Among others, Posen (1993: 81) also believes that "nationalism increases the intensity of warfare, and...the ability of states to mobilise the creative energies...of millions of soldiers". However, Van Evera (1995: 136) argues that most of these authors "take the war-causing character of nationalism for granted, assuming it without proof or explanation".

The debate surrounding the correlation between nationalism and war has once again re-emerged and intensified when the world witnessed the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This world-historical event led to an eruption of ethnic tensions in some of its former republics and in other communist countries, in particular, in the Balkans. While some considered the breakdown of communism a triumph of Western liberal democracy, the predictions of Fukuyama (1992) about 'the end of history' through the victory of liberalism were soon proven false. Instead, "with the demise of the Cold War we have once again [re]entered 'a new age of violence', one whose dominant narrative is the ethnic civil war and whose language is that of ethnic nationalism" (Ignatieff 1993 cited in Beissinger 2001: 850).

However, despite the great interest and the relatively large amount of scholarship focusing on the causal nexus between nationalism and war, little progress has been made on finding solutions to the questions concerning the causes of violent ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Is nationalism a chronic danger to world peace? Under what conditions do ethnic and nationalist sentiments evoke violence? These are the questions that remain unresolved, awaiting further research and analysis. Therefore, by revisiting the hotly debated topic of ethnic violence, this dissertation will be an attempt to contribute to this field of social sciences. In this work I will investigate

ethnic civil wars in Georgia, where violence made headlines both during and after the last years of the Soviet Union, and will attempt to shed light to the issues concerning the relationship of nationalism and violence in this part of the world.

Birch (199: 90) argues that "while the Yugoslav case has been treated as a matter of great international concern, the smaller scale...cleansings in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] have tended to be viewed as more local issues of comparatively little concern to the outside world". Therefore, by revisiting Georgia's modern history of early 1990s I hope to raise awareness to such small scale, "yet equally devastating and decisive" (*ibid.*) conflicts as so-called 'South Ossetia' (or Samachablo, Tskhinvali district of Shida [Inner] Kartli region of Georgia) and Abkhazia not only among a small circle of academic scholars interested in this region but also among wide international community.

The late Soviet and Post-Soviet period is indeed an interesting period to make observations on inter- or intra-ethnic violence. While many analysts consider the transition of former USSR republics to be relatively peaceful, ethnic tensions in at least seven republics of the former Soviet Union demonstrate that the demise of the Soviet empire was far from painless after all. The violent conflicts that erupted in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia within Georgia, in Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the Russian Federation between North Ossetia and Ingushetia, and between Russia and Chechnya, in Transdnistria within Moldova, in Ferghana Valley within Uzbekistan, and in Tajikistan speak for themselves (Hughes & Sasse 2002).

However, in studying the relationship between nationalism and war, Georgia provides a suitable case study because it best illustrates events in 'the boiling cauldron' of Caucasian politics (Derluguian 1999: 261). According to Aves (1996: 167), Georgia was "the least successful of the Soviet successor states", and was seen as a good example of how nationalism can often take multiple faces. This small former Soviet republic gained its independence largely because of the national awakening and the mass nationalist mobilisation while becoming aggressive and war-prone thanks to the same nationalism (Snyder & Mansfield 1995, 2005). Georgia was one of the first Soviet republics where dissident organisations were set up and national-liberation movements broke up. It was the second republic after

Lithuania to declare its independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991, and the first to hold multi-party and presidential elections (Diuk & Karatnycky 1993: 142). However, it was also "the first republic to run its democratically elected president out of office by force" (*ibid.*).

Georgia is also a good demonstration of how unification nationalism can often turn into what Hechter (2000: 17) calls irredentist (in 'South Ossetian case') and peripheral (in Abkhazian case) nationalisms. It is also a good example of a complete failure first of the Soviet policy and then the policies of Georgia's new government to accommodate competing ethnic claims. As Kaufman (2001: 85) argues, "none of the other post-Soviet republics has been riven by as many different violent conflicts as has Georgia". Indeed, Georgia was the only republic in the former Soviet space where several military conflicts emerged simultaneously in different parts of the country between the years 1991 and 1993.

In chronological order, the armed conflict in 'South Ossetia' first erupted, lasting roughly from January 5, 1991 to July 14, 1992 and escalating again in July-August 2004. Following, was the military *coup d'etat* in Tbilisi, taking place during December 22, 1991- January 6, 1992 in which the first President Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-92) was overthrown and forced to flee the country. War in Abkhazia lasted from August 14, 1992 to May 15, 1994, escalating again in May 1998 and October 2001. Both South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts remain unresolved up to present time. These events were accompanied by civil war in western Georgia among Gamsakhurdia's supporters and state forces during 1992-93 (Wheatley 2005). With this record, Georgia remains the most notorious case among other post-Soviet military confrontations. Therefore, by examining the causes of ethnic conflicts in some depth in this multi-ethnic society we can develop a better understanding of the nature of ethnic violence in post-Soviet space in general.

Due to its strategic geo-political location in the Caucasus region, where it occupies 69,700 square kilometre territory, Georgia has often been considered a bridge between west and east, where Europe met with Asia, and where Christianity shared a spiritual frontier with Islam (Diuk & Karatnycky 1993: 141). Attracting people from all over the world throughout the centuries, what is now known as the Georgian state, is a place "where cultures have crossed and clashed for millennia" (Henze 1983

cited in Seely 2001: 5).

The 'Caucasian mosaic' has often become the bloodiest venue of Ionian Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Khazars, Huns, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, Byzantinians, Mongols, Tsarist Russian and Soviet empires (Hewitt 1995; Menon & Fuller 2000). Different tribes mixing and settling greatly contributed to making the whole region one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse places in the world. Kaufman (2001: 86) argues, that "more than Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia reflects the Caucasus region's remarkable ethnic diversity", and as we shall see later, this has often become a crucial tool of manipulation in the hands of many internal and external forces.

The initial question that the following dissertation will be examining is *why Georgia turned to civil war as a means of resolving its internal conflicts versus any other type of solution and what role did nationalism play in fuelling inter and intra-ethnic violence?*

1. First, I will argue that in Georgia's case there is no single cause to the violent conflicts, and that by focusing on only a single approach or a model, scholars and political decision-makers often miss out the broader and deeper issues to be tackled. As Beissinger (2001: 850) argues, "the boundaries of nationalism as a motivation for violence are impossible to define with any precision" because of the presence of so many other deeply intertwined factors.

2. Second, I will demonstrate that in Georgia there can be identified three major factors that contributed the most to the processes leading to violence, and that ignoring any one of these factors will lead to a misguided investigation of that period. Through the cases of 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia, and to some extent Adjara, I will demonstrate how each of these factors reinforced each other, and indeed how deeply intertwined they are:

   a) *Institutional mechanisms inherited from the USSR.* I will argue that the Soviet legacy and its nationality policy aided the creation of conflictual definitions of 'us' – the Georgians and 'others' – the Ossetians (or Ossetes) and the Abkhazians (or Abkhazs) by politisation and institutionalisation of ethnicity, culture, and language. I will also show how the polarisation of society was avoided along the religious lines in the Adjarian case.

b) *Political, military, and intellectual elite groups.* I will explore in some depth and apply to the Georgian case the argument developed by Snyder and Ballentine (1996), that if institutional weakness of the state exists then it is more likely that political and military leadership will exploit inexperienced masses as a good 'marketplace' for nationalist ideology. I will also demonstrate how crucial the role of mythmaking in the hands of the elites is in terms of rallying people along ethnic lines.

c) *The external factor of the heir of the Soviet empire - that of Russia.* Scholars, as well as politicians, especially in the West, try to avoid directly convicting Russia in actively encouraging and aiding 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia in their separatist aspirations. However, based on available evidence, I will argue that Russia's role in these conflicts was (and remains to be) just as crucial as the other two factors.

3. Lastly I will argue that the events that unfolded in Georgia in late 1980s and early 1990s were not due to primordial ethnic differences and centuries-old animosities between different ethnic groups. Rather, the history of the causes of these conflicts can be traced to the recent past and not to 'ancient' times. This paper will be a clear demonstration of the absurdity of labelling these conflicts as 'ethnic' when in reality, their causes lie not in 'ethnic' hatreds between Georgians, Ossetians, or Abkhazians, but in artificial constructions of 'ethnicity' per se.

The study relies on Georgian, Russian and Western sources of the Soviet and post-Soviet period. In addition to this, I have incorporated information from personal observations of this period as well as information received from oral telephone interviews that I conducted during the summer of 2006. These interviews with several of the key players in Georgian politics in late 1980s and early 1990s gave me a unique opportunity to get a deeper, insider's perspective on the whole process. Some of these people were leaders of the nationalist movement of Georgia (Batiashvili and Natadze), others held responsible political and military posts (Batiashvili and Karkarashvili). They were (some still are) participating in the 'making' of modern history of Georgia. Their opinion of the events that unfolded in Georgia in the early 1990s arising from their different political backgrounds was, in retrospect, crucial for the analysis outlined in this dissertation *(for a complete list of all the people interviewed for this research and the list of the questions asked please refer to*

appendix 1 on page 43).

In the following chapters of the dissertation, I will first concentrate on the definition of the term 'nationalism' and go over some of its major theories and approaches to the study of ethnic and nationalist violence. Further, I will outline a theoretical framework for the case of Georgia itself. Subsequently, chapter three will explore how the institutional choices made by the Soviets in the early 1920s and thereafter aided in legalising ethnicity and implementing it as the main form of identity in the USSR. Chapter four will be dealing with the question of the elites and their techniques of persuasion, in particular, the power of mythmaking. Chapter five will explore in more depth the importance of external forces - the Moscow factor - in fuelling these conflicts. Lastly, chapter six will summarise the main arguments of this paper, that there is no one story of why conflicts in Georgia turned violent while many other former Soviet Union countries were able to avoid wars. Therefore, it is important to observe the major factors at present, that of institutions, elites, and external forces as a whole, and understand how deeply intertwined they indeed are.

Chapter II – Defining Nationalism and Its Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Ethnic and Nationalist Violence

In this chapter, I will first define the much debated term of 'nationalism' and will look at some of the most relevant theoretical approaches and different models trying to explain ethnic grievances in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslav cases. In the last part of the chapter, I will outline my own theoretical explanation of the causes of ethnic tensions in the Georgian case.

<u>'Nationalism' – Good, Bad, None, or Both?</u>

Nationalist discourse is probably one of the most controversial areas of the social sciences and as a very interdisciplinary field, nationalism studies involves a wide range of scholars and analysts. The French Revolution of 1789, the World Wars I and II, and most recently, the bloodshed in the Balkans and the Caucasus have all played their role in earning nationalism a relatively poor reputation. Indeed, nationalist

violence has been 'visibly prominent' in the history of nationalism and has often been the defining element in most of the major warfares of the past century or two (Beissinger 2001: 850). Therefore, it is not surprising that "in the eyes of many observers (and most certainly within the popular mind), nationalism remains closely intertwined with violence" (*ibid.*).

In reality, however, "nationalism is neither good nor evil" (*ibid.*), or rather, nationalism can be both, good and evil, and it can have multiple faces.[i] It does not 'inherently' involve violence and its meaning should not be reduced to some form of violence only (*ibid.: 851*). I see nationalism as, in Kohn's (1945: 18-19) words "a state of mind...an idée-force, which fills man's brain and heart with new thoughts and new sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organised action". Furthermore, nationalism is "an ideological movement" (Smith 1991: 73) at the core of which "is the idea of the nation" (Greenfeld 1992: 3-4), therefore, "it can mean emancipation, and it can mean oppression: nationalism...is a repository of dangers as well as opportunities" (Alter 1989: 2).

Many, however, often forget the good side of nationalism. The very same notion of nationalism which became a fatal driving force of the conflicts in 'South Ossetia', Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in the Caucasus, was also what rallied the masses around national-liberation movements and eventually brought long-awaited independence to the Transcaucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. These countries are also good demonstration of how easily national sentiments can be manipulated and how far nationalism can go. They show that there is a thin line between non-violent and violent nationalisms.

Social scientists have tried to find various theories, models, and approaches that would fit, to best explain where exactly this line goes. What are the causes of ethnic and nationalist violence and why do they happen when they happen are the main questions of inquiry. Outlined below are the major competing theories and approaches around which most scholars of nationalism usually group.

Approaches to the Study of Ethnic Violence

While trying to come up with some explanation to the ethnic turbulence in such culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse regions as the Caucasus, both the popular opinion and academic literature is biased by the stereotypical assumption that there is no end to the ongoing or 'frozen' conflicts because of primordial animosities among these different ethnic groups. Five violent conflicts in this region since the collapse of the Soviet Union, involving eight different national or ethnic groups, seem to give Western commentators a good reason for blaming 'ancient hatreds'.[ii]

However, even though Georgians and Ossetians, or Abkhazians, Russians and Chechens, or Ingushs, as well as Armenians and Azeris may not be tied by blood, belonging to different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, the hypothesis of primordial 'ethnic loyalties' or 'ethnic antagonisms' is more of an artificial construction rather than reality (Bowen 1996: 3). As Varshney (2002: 34) argues in the case of Hindus and Muslims in India, in Georgia as well, incidents between individuals have often been contextualised, interpreted, or represented as battles between Georgian and Ossetian or Georgian and Abkhazian communities giving an impression of intrinsic cultural hatreds among these people.

The followers of the 'national revival' interpretation of ethnic conflicts argue that the disintegration of the USSR led to the uncovering of those well-preserved hatreds and animosities (Menteshashvili 1990: 3). The USSR held these tensions under control and as soon as the 'loosening' of the Stalinist system of controls was under way (Dallin 1992: 282), ethnic grievances erupted with all their might. However, the core of this misunderstanding is that while ethnic conflicts at a lesser degree are more or less inevitable in any multi-ethnic or multi-national society, in authoritarian states, unlike democratic ones, these conflicts cannot be voiced through open political expression (Varshney 2002: 24-25). This was the case in the Soviet Union as well, where dissatisfied ethnic groups were locked into a 69 years-old political repression, giving an impression of a well-governed, happy society (*ibid.:* 25), an image of which was soon swept away after *glasnost, perestroika,* and the liberalisation of the system began. Therefore, conflicts within or among different ethnic groups were always present but were silenced during the Soviet period.

On the other hand, those who believe that ethnic identities are more likely to produce violence, while identities based on material resources are more negotiable, argue that because the Soviet Union was a classless society (in theory at least), this aided much to grouping people more around ethnic and cultural similarities rather than economic interests. Thus, the construction of economic identities gave way to the construction of ethnic identities and eventually led to violence. The rationale here is that "clashes based on ethnic identities resist compromise, arouse passion instead of reason, and generate violence" (*ibid.:* 26). However, it should be noted that "ethnic conflicts, although grounded *in* ascriptive group identities, are not always *about* identities....and are not always violent. And despite having strong ethnic identities, groups can coexist peacefully with others by negotiating" (*ibid*. original emphasis).

In search of an answer to the question of why did these ethnic conflicts eventually turn violent after the demise of the Soviet Union, Snyder (2000) has emerged as one of the most prominent advocates of the 'elite persuasion' approach. He argues that ethnicity becomes a powerful instrument in the hands of the elites especially during democratic transitions. Partial freedom of elections and freedom of speech enables leaders to engage into the "propagandistic manipulations of public opinion" and to use inexperienced masses as a good marketplace for their nationalist ideas (Snyder & Ballentine 1996: 5).

On the other hand, proponents of an emotion-based approach argue that emotions can substitute for leadership and that the "elites must...be seen as responding to structural change and mass emotion rather than shaping it" (Petersen 2002: 4, 35). However, as I will be arguing later, the case of Georgia can best be explained by Snyder's (2000) theory than by that of Kaufman's (2001). Elites in Tbilisi, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali, and Moscow[iii] were more creating these mass emotions rather than merely responding to them. They were using nationalism as an instrument to manipulate the national sentiments of their people, and with different tactics of 'persuasion' fuelled violent military confrontations among these groups.

Yet another approach, that of institutionalism, argues that "there are clearly identifiable connections between ethnic conflict or peace, on one hand, and political institutions, on the other" (Varshney 2002: 35). Indeed, institutional forms left to

the Newly Independent States (NIS) as a heritage from the Soviet Union definitely had an impact on the outburst of many conflicts within the former borders of the USSR. Wars in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia can also largely be attributed to "the federal structure of the Communist period,...break[ing] up in the course of post-Communist transitions" (Derluguian 1999: 261). The creation of two autonomous republics within a small territory of Georgia, that of Abkhazia and Adjara, and an autonomous region of 'South Ossetia' was a direct result of the Soviet *divide and rule* policies. Institutional choices made by the new-born independent Georgia in early 1990s, favouring a strong presidential republic that left the head of the state with often unchecked and unbalanced powers, also contributed much to the outbreak of violence.

The realist school of international relations lobbies another approach to ethnic conflicts, that of 'security dilemma' which has become quite popular among scholars writing on former Soviet Union and the Balkan countries. Theorists of this approach argue that ethnic conflicts within a given state are a direct result of a fear coming from a real or an exaggerated internal or external threat, creating an eventual security dilemma and leading to violence (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 437; Beissinger 2001: 859). However, some scholars focus more on internal threats rather than external. Through the Serbian case, Gagnon (1994: 134) tries to demonstrate that it is not external factors that are crucial in fuelling ethnic tensions, but 'internal dynamics', and that "domestic arena is of central concern for state decision-makers and ruling elites". Lynch (2002: 835) makes similar argument regarding the former Soviet Union countries and argues that the external threat is often exaggerated in order to shift public attention from the problems within a state itself. However, as I will demonstrate later, security dilemma created by external threat was just as important as the one created by internal forces.

Another argument developed by Mueller (2000) around the former Yugoslav case can also be applied to Georgia as well. He argues that the concept of 'ethnic warfare' is all too 'banal' in the first place and that "essentially [it] does not exist" (*ibid.*: 42). In reality, what people call an 'ethnic war' is often a war waged by small bands of opportunistic marauders, drunken criminals, and hooligans recruited by political leaders (*ibid.*: 42, 43).

Similar arguments can be found in Glinkina and Rosenberg's (2003: 513) article, where they argue that in "the Caucasus...criminality has replaced ethnicity as the major motivation for conflict and conflict per se has become a lucrative source of income". Paramilitary groupings, such as *Mkhedrioni*, with often criminal-record recruits (but by no means all its recruits were of criminal convictions of course), has indeed often been blamed in stirring the wars of 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia.[iv] However, even though they played a crucial role in deepening (and even starting) the violence, blaming solely these paramilitary groupings in ranging the warfare in Georgia would be a rather simplistic way of explaining these conflicts.

Yet in a case study of another former USSR state Moldova, Kaufman (1996: 108) identifies three main factors - "hostile masses, belligerent leaders, and inter-ethnic security dilemmas" in the violent ethnic conflict and argues that "by focusing on only one cause of conflict...many of these arguments create the false impression that where that one factor is present, ethnic war threatens". Therefore, he believes that "these factors cause ethnic war by reinforcing each other in a spiral of increasing conflict" (*ibid.*). While his arguments stand the closest to the ones identified in this dissertation, contrary to Kaufman (1996, 2001), who brings up Georgia and Moldova as examples of mass-led violence - 'popular chauvinism', in the next few paragraphs below I will be arguing in favour of elite-led nationalism in the Georgian case instead, focusing on institutions rather than the masses in Kaufman's three-factor spiral. As I will demonstrate later, conflicts in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia were more elite-driven rather than anything else and that in these cases leaders were leading rather than being led by the masses.

Explaining the Case of Georgia

All these above mentioned theories and approaches definitely provide valuable insights to the study of ethnic and nationalist violence, however, one can still to question whether a single definitive answer exists that explains why Georgia faced so much intra- and inter-ethnic violence at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century. Therefore, another question arises, whether it is at all possible to frame such complicated issue as ethnic violence into one theory or another. As Stavenhagen (996: 97) argues, the dynamics of ethnic conflicts may be similar in

many parts of the world but one should never forget that each case "is unique to the circumstances in which it occurs".

I believe that there is no singular cause to civil ethnic wars and this is where I think current academic thought might have gone wrong. By focusing on singular issues scholars and analysts might have clouded their judgement of the wider factors at work. As Khazanov (1996: 6) argues, "the very nature of ethnic tension and strife not infrequently makes it impossible to form categorical judgements about who is right and who is wrong". Equally, finding out what exactly caused the outbreak of violence and why did it happen at a given time at a given place is also difficult.

The aim of this dissertation is not to figure out which side is more to blame in stirring the ethnic strife in Georgia. After closely examining the roots of ethnic conflicts in this region, it is not hard to find out that arguments on both sides may seem quite rational (*ibid.*). Indeed, it is difficult to deny that the policies of Georgian government did violate the rights of ethnic minorities, while the very same minorities did not hesitate to conduct ethnic cleansing and atrocities against the Georgian population during their counter-offensive (*ibid.*). Proposing solutions to 'South Ossetian' and Abkhazian conflicts is also beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, in this dissertation I will argue that any single approach to ethnic conflicts is just an oversimplification of much deeper issue, and will instead look at these conflicts from a broader perspective.

First, even though for convenience I will continue using the terms of 'ethnic' or 'nationalist' conflict or violence throughout the paper, through the cases of 'South Ossetia', Abkhazia, and Adjara, I will try to demonstrate the absurdity of the concept of 'ethnic' conflict in the former Soviet Union in general. Although some tensions (and even conflicts, though not violent) existed between different ethnic groups within the Georgian state, there is no solid evidence that they are deeply rooted in cultural differences. I will also argue against the assumption (widely held and advocated especially by the Western scholars) about the natives of the Caucasus or the Balkans being less civilised (or not civilised at all) (Mueller 2000: 67). Again, no hard evidence exists that 'uncivilised' cultures of these people are naturally inclined to violence.

In the contrary, I will argue that 'ethnicity' in Georgian conflicts is largely a myth and that cultural differences were deliberately politicised and institutionalised throughout the two centuries of Tsarist and Soviet rule. Placing 'South Ossetian' and Abkhazian conflicts within ethnic framework was just a cover under which a severe struggle for power and socio-economic resources between the leadership in Georgia, its different regions, and Russia took place (Gagnon 1994: 131; Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 425, 444; Lynch 2000: 129).

Second, I will argue that the institutional mechanism inherited by Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union aided much the deepening of these ethnic tensions. Institutionalisation of 'ethnicity' in the Soviet Union, which was supposed to be a classless society without a religion and with only a single soviet identity, was one of many paradoxes of that period which defined a political culture of Georgia and played a huge role in grouping its citizens along ethnic lines.

Third, peculiarity of institutional mechanisms of the Soviet Union cannot be a sole explanation of violent ethnic conflicts of course. While they are largely to be blamed in the cases of Georgia and Moldova, for instance, it can be argued that the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan also inherited the very same institutions from the USSR but avoided the breakdown in violence. This is when the political, military, and intellectual elites enter the arena. Although many are sceptical to how much the demagogic politicians actually lead the masses (Kaufman 1996, 2001; Mueller 2000; Petersen 2002), I argue that deliberate policies as well as various decisions made at certain times by leadership often directly or indirectly had an enormous influence on the development of ethnic grievances.

Fourth, even though most of the 'threats', internal or external, directed to a particular ethnic group are often exaggerated or even imagined, what Goltz (1993) calls 'the hidden Russian hand' was always present in almost all post-Soviet conflicts. This issue is often regarded (or even disregarded) as trivial and is often perceived as much exaggerated by the Georgian side (Lynch 2002: 835). The outburst of these conflicts or their resolution in the future may not be solely dependent upon Russia but the reality is that the leadership in Moscow was as actively involved in the processes that unfolded in the Caucasus at the eve of the break-up of the Union as local elite groups in Tbilisi and in the autonomous territories.

Chapter III – Legalising Ethnic Identity: The Soviet 'Hangover'

Popular, and to some extent academic and political opinion continues to believe that the demise of the Soviet Union removed the lid on the 'conserved' hatreds and animosities among different ethnic groups of the Caucasus. Some go even further and blame the turbulent history of these peoples on their less civilised nature, often referring to them as "*temnye liudi,* unenlightened 'dark people'" (Suny 1993: 23). However, as Stavenhogen (1996: 33) argues, "ethnic diversity does not in itself signal the inevitability of conflict. It is only when ethnic diversity is politically mobilised to serve specific interests related to governance that the potential for conflict between ethnic groups becomes realised".

In this chapter I will argue that ethnic tensions that surfaced in Georgia in early 1990s were directly connected to the imperial policies of the Soviet Union. The nationality question remains one of the many paradoxes of the Soviet reality, continuing to be one of the most hotly debated issues in Sovietology even after fifteen years of the collapse of the USSR. Thus, the main focus of chapter three will be the Soviet nationality policy and its legacy that so successfully politicised and institutionalised ethnicity as a legal form of identity in the 20th century.

<u>The Soviet Nationality Policy</u>

What scholars now call the Soviet 'nationality policy' was originally based on Lenin's approach to the questions of self-determination, multi-nationality, and federalism. The term 'national self-determination', first used in the 19th century, became largely appealing to many of Tsarist Empire's ethnic minorities after the October Revolution of 1917 (Gleason 1990: 26-27). As Connor (1984: 581) put it, "the manipulation of the national aspirations of minorities was a key element in the assumption and consolidation of power by the Bolsheviks".

Lenin believed that self-determination was to grant only a temporary permission to minority groups to express their nationalist sentiments in exchange for their political support of socialism (Pipes 1964: 296-297; Gleason 1990: 27). His argument in favour of this was that if nations had free access to the right of self-determination, then they would not fight for it, therefore, "it was necessary to offer this right 'in principle' so that it would not be demanded in practice" (Gleason 1990: 30). Like

Marx before him, Lenin also believed that socialism would eventually lead to the demise of nations. According to the Marxist-Leninist ideology, "national differences…would wither as nations passed from stages of national development (*rastsvet*), through a 'growing together' (*sblizhenie*), to an ultimate state of merging or 'fusion' (*sliianie*)" (*ibid.:* 36).

Stalin (1942: 12) agreed with the above statement and believed that every nation had its beginning and end. He saw a nation as "an historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture", and argued that if any one of these components were missing then the nation would cease to exist (*ibid.*). Thus, the "pseudo-federal state" (Suny 1993: 101) of the Soviet Union was largely based on these four main characteristics of a nation outlined by Stalin.

At the time of its collapse, the USSR consisted of 127 officially recognised ethnic entities (Glebov & Crowfoot 1989: 78). Ethnic groups with a relatively large population were labelled as 'nations' and had a right to their own republic. Others, with a smaller population ratio were called 'nationalities' and were assigned lower status (Stavenhogen 1996: 58). The USSR was comprised of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR). Within these Union republics, 40 other peoples possessed some form of governmental structure, whose title also reflected their national identity. All together, there were 20 Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR), 8 Autonomous Regions (*Oblast*), and 10 Autonomous Areas (*Okrug*) within the USSR (Connor 1984: 221). Each of these ethnic or national groups which had received the right to constitute one of these governmental units was recognised as its 'titular nation' (Coppieters n.d.).

Such hierarchical division of different ethnic and national groups on a state and sub-state level in a Soviet society, all theoretically marching towards the creation of a sole 'Soviet' identity, leads to an important question. Why would the Soviet central government, where, as Seely (2001) argues, any form of nationalism other than 'Sovietised Russian' was regarded as a potential threat, as 'reactionary' or 'proto-Nazi', grant so many different ethnic groups territorial, cultural, and linguistic autonomy? Brubaker (1996: 7) calls this unique Soviet phenomenon, an 'institutionalised multi-nationality' and believes that the consequences brought by it

were unintended. However, the Georgian society has always regarded setting up three autonomous territories within its borders, while many less ethnically homogeneous republics had no autonomies at all, a deliberate policy of the Soviet *divide and rule* strategy (Aves 1992: 177).

The Nationality Question: The Case of Georgia

By the end of 1980s Georgia became the most vivid example of the transformation of territorial and cultural autonomy into nationalism (Gleason 1990: 112). Established as a SSR on February 25, 1921 after brief independence between 1918 and 1921, from March 12, 1922 to December 5, 1936 Georgia was part of the Transcaucasian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic (TFSSR) together with the Armenian and the Azerbaijan SSRs. Within its state boundaries Georgia was hosting three autonomous territories. The Adjarian and Abkhazian ASSRs were created in early 1921 first *(refer to appendix 2 for the political map of Transcaucasia on page 45)*.

In Abkhazia, the Soviet rule was established on March 4 and in December the same year, a pact of union was signed between Abkhazia and Georgia establishing a federation of two sovereign republics enjoying equal rights. Following this on April 20, 1922 the Autonomous Region of South Ossetia was set up (Aves 1996: 159). However, more than Abkhazia and Adjara, the legitimacy of South Ossetian autonomous region has often been questioned. Ossetians have generally been perceived as a national minority with only certain constitutional rights but without any territorial privileges (Zakareishvili *et al* 2005: 7-8). It is still widely believed in Georgia that because Ossetians already have a historical homeland in North Ossetia, it is illegitimate for them to demand a territorial autonomy in another country (*ibid.:* 22).

Almost a decade later, in 1931, Abkhazia was transformed into Autonomous Republic within the Georgian Union Republic, allowing Abkhazians to declare in 1989 that "Abkhazia is...the only republic in the USSR whose status was scaled down, rather than up, according to Stalin's wishes" (Ardzinba cited in Glebov & Crowfoot 1989: 79). Because of Stalin's Georgian roots it is often argued that many of his political decisions were in favour of his birthplace and that he protected Georgia from the worst excesses of the 1930s. However, historical records do not support these accusations.

"Far from benefiting from Stalin's patronage, it is probable that proportionately Georgia suffered more than any other republic during the purges" of 1930s as well as during the WWII when over 10% of the whole population, more than 380,000 Georgians died – the number which is proportionately higher than any other republic's (Parsons 1990: 184, 194). As for Ardzinba's claims, Georgians strongly believe that what was wrong indeed was Stalin's decision to let Abkhazia sign a Union pact with Georgia and adopt a separate constitution in 1925 (Davitashvili 2003: 408). Derluguian (1999) is also convinced that "the Soviet state initially shored up Abkhazian [and Ossetian] political power in order to create an ally against opposing political forces in Georgia" (*ibid.:* 261-262).

Even though nationalism per se was indeed severely repressed anywhere within the Soviet Union, this did not apply to 'nationhood' and 'nationality' (Brubaker 1996: 8). Although, the notion of the 'Soviet People' (*sovetskii narod*) was introduced late in the 1960s and 1970s, the line between the overarching categories of nationhood/nationality and statehood/citizenship remained distinct within the USSR (*ibid.:* 23, 28). Russians, as the largest nationality of the Soviet Union were often (if not always) perceived as 'Soviets', especially in the West, but as Karklins (1986: 22) argues, "no Soviet citizen would make that mistake, being acutely aware of the difference between nationality and citizenship".

The same scenario was taking place in Georgia as well. Even though foreigners might have regarded people living in Georgian Republic simply as Georgians, citizens of Georgia would never confuse citizenship and nationality with each other. For them these were two very distinct social categories that had few things in common. Thus, while the Soviet policy makers went further than any other state "in sponsoring, codifying, institutionalising, and even (in some cases) inventing nationhood and nationality on sub-state level,..[they did]...nothing to institutionalise them on the level of the state as a whole" (Brubaker 1996: 29).

Official state policy of nativisation (*korenizatsiia*) indeed created opportunities for consolidating nationality and nation (Gellner 1983: 4; Suny 1993: 98) at a sub-state level in many parts of the USSR, including the Caucasus. But simultaneous 'territorial and political' and 'ethno-cultural and personal' institutionalisation of ethnicity strengthened national self-consciousness of ethnic minorities as well

(Brubaker 1996: 23). While the Union republics and their autonomous territories lacked any real sovereignty, at the same time, every large non-Russian ethnic and national group within the Soviet Union was guaranteed a territorial identity. Through this nativisation policy, the promotion of national languages via establishing educational and cultural institutions in indigenous languages, and the promotion of native cadres into positions of power was officially institutionalised (Suny 1993: 101, 105). Therefore, the politisation of nationality and nationhood in the national republics and their autonomous territories was dramatically increased, reaching its peak in late 1980s.

Institutionalising Ethnicity in Georgia

Georgia was not a homogeneous state, therefore, the process of ethnic and national consolidation went in three different directions. The ethno-federal nature of the USSR left the Georgian SSR with three autonomous territories and three titular nationalities within its state borders. Ethnic Georgians were considered a titular nation of Georgian SSR, constituting 70.1% of the whole population of 5,448,600 people by the year 1989 (Parsons 1990: 183). 93,267 Abkhazians comprised a titular nation of Abkhazian ASSR. In 1989 they constituted only 17.8% of the population of 525,061 people in Abkhazia (Hewitt 1995: 49), leaving them with only 1.8% among Georgia's total population (Slider 1997: 168-169).

Yet, Ossetians were titular nation of South Ossetian Autonomous Region with a population of 99,000 by 1989. Ethnic Ossetians made up about 2/3 of the local population and over 3% of Georgia's total population (Aves 1996: 165; Webber 1996: 232). Adjara, with a population of about 392,000 people in 1989, is ethnically Georgian but Adjarians are predominantly Muslims while the overwhelming majority of ethnic Georgians in rest of the country practice Orthodox Christianity (Aves 1996: 160). In 1926 when Adjarians were last counted separately in a Soviet census, they made up 4% of the total population of Georgia (Goldenberg 1994: 101).

However, while the Soviet authorities actively promoted an idea of a nation fixed to a certain territory (Suny 1993: 110), they also promoted an alternative view of a nation, that of "an ethno-cultural community, typically a community of language" (Brubaker 1996: 35). Language indeed was an important component in politicising ethnicity as Georgians, Abkhazians, and Ossetians all spoke different languages. The Abkhazian

language belongs to the North-West Caucasian branch of the Ibero-Caucasian language family (Toft 2002: 129-130). However, even though Georgian language is also part of the Caucasian language family, attempts to link the South Caucasian (or Kartvelian) branch, to which it belongs to, to any other language families within or beyond the Caucasus has been unsuccessful so far (Hewitt 1995: 49).

Ossetians are an Indo-European people of the Iranian branch and speak an Indo-European language related to Persian. As for religion, Sunni Muslims as well as Orthodox Christians, and pagans can all be found among Abkhazians (Derluguian 1999: 276). On the other hand, while predominantly Orthodox Christians, some Ossetians practice Sunni Islam as well but due to the atheist nature of the Soviet rule, religion has never played an important role in the formation of Abkhazian or Ossetian national identities (Aves 1996: 159).

By granting these territorial, cultural, and linguistic autonomies to different ethnic groups, the first attempt was made towards the formation of self-conscious nationalities out of different ethnic groups within Georgia (Suny 1990: 248). Adjara, however, was an exception and that is why Derluguian (1999: 275) calls it 'the land without a people'. Even though Adjarians had their own territory, there was no 'Adjarian' language as such as they all speak Georgian so Adjarians did not develop a strong sense of national identity (Kaufman 2001: 124). Thus, another reason why Adjarian cultural identity never became a politically relevant phenomenon was because the Soviets were not committed to the political recognition of religion-based cultural groups within their federal state. Religion was not one of the four components of Stalin's definition of a nation. Therefore, while Ossetians and Abkhazians were given the status of a titular nationality, Adjarians were denied it.

Derluguian (1999: 262) also argues that religion was indeed the primary reason why Moscow did not prevent the assimilation – complete 'Georgianisation' of Adjarians. Despite being the main determinant for setting up an autonomous republic in Adjara, religion could not have become primary basis for a new Adjarian identity in an atheist Soviet society. Even though the Soviet reality was full of controversial principles, politicising a term 'Muslim Georgian' would have been an extreme line, and any self-conscious Georgian would have considered it "an oxymoron; more than that, a dangerous abnormality" (*ibid.*).

However, the division of a society at a sub-state level was not purely territorial or linguistic. In the USSR status and privileges, even though not officially recognised, often depended on "the political considerations of the Moscow party leadership" (Coppieters n.d.), therefore, dividing society into several 'titular nations' meant that certain ethnic groups would always be in advantage in certain parts of a state. For being representatives of titular nations, Ossetians and Abkhazians were granted a disproportionate share of socio-economic, political, and cultural privileges in their own autonomous regions. Starting in late 1970s, for example, an intensified process of 'Abkhazianisation' (Webber 1996: 233), a counter-policy of Georgian government's 'Georgianisation', put authorities in Tbilisi under enormous pressure. They had to satisfy the demands of ethnic Georgians within Abkhazia for fairer treatment, especially since with 44% of the population they were the ethnic majority of this autonomous republic (Parsons 1990:192).

These privileges came in made forms. Abkhazians, for instance, were given the right to set up their own television station in 1978, a privilege denied to much more numerous ethnic minorities in other parts of the Union, including Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Goldenberg 1994: 89). On the other hand, Abkhazians and Ossetians, as well as significant numbers of other minorities in Georgia: Armenians, Russians, Azeris, Jews, Kurds, or Greeks found themselves disadvantaged "in the competition for the budgetary pie", being relatively underrepresented at the state level in Georgia, a level which became a protected area of privilege for ethnic Georgians (Suny 1994: 290). However, any action attempting to improve this situation and reach compromise met with a fierce opposition and counter accusations on each side, aiding to further accumulation of the grievances within the parties involved (Parsons 1990:192).

Yet, another Soviet step towards institutionalising the concept of 'nationhood' was introducing nationality as a legal means of identification in 1932 (Brubaker 1996: 32). Since then, identifying one's nationality became a standard practice in virtually all official papers in the USSR. A person's nationality was officially determined at birth, by the nationality of one's parents, and he or she was legally categorised according to this nationality in all personal or official documents throughout his or her entire life (Karklins 1986: 23). As Karklins (1986: 32, 42) argues, nationality was "an immutable ascriptive characteristic of every Soviet citizen" and its consequences

constituted "one of the more interesting and…under-explored facets of Soviet ethnic processes and politics".

Assisted by these state-sponsored processes, it is unsurprising that Ossetians and Abkhazians gradually strengthened their ethnic identities while the strength of the concept of citizenship remained low in Georgia. As the Soviets claimed, these policies were to promote "ethnic harmony and a progressive convergence of the many nations into a single internationalist whole" (Karklins 1986: 11). However, after 69 years of existence, "rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations" (Suny 1993: 87).

Thus, the Soviet experiment of merging more than 100 different nationalities and ethnic groups into the new identity of *Homo Sovieticus* failed bitterly and the constant threat of nationalist resurgence proved impossible to eliminate (Seely 2001: 11). The Soviet "legacy of a fake federalism" (Libal 2002: 12) produced quite the opposite outcome than was expected by its founders and led the Soviet Union to its ultimate destruction. Here, Rosa Luxemburg's statement following the October Revolution of 1917 can easily be applied to the events of late 1980s as well:

> Nations and mini-nations are cropping up on all sides announcing their right to form states. Putrefied corpses are climbing out of age-old graves, filled with the sap of a new spring, and peoples 'without history' who never yet formed an independent state, feel a powerful urge to do so (cited in Connor 1984: 581).

Identified above as one of the three main factors present during ethnic turbulences in the former Soviet space, the nationality policy of the USSR shaped Soviet society in two very different and conflictual ways. A powerful tool in the hands of the central government, on the one hand it institutionalised identities based on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences and promoted ethnic consciousness among different minority groups. On the other hand, it created a "visceral suspicion of 'autonomy' in the post-communist world" (Libal 2002: 13), aiding the alienation of different ethnic groups at a sub-state level. Afterwards, all that was required to make large-scale nationalist mobilisation in Georgia possible, leading to the eventual outburst of violence, was the political space afforded by *glasnost* and *perestroika* in late 1980s (Kaufman 2001: 100). Therefore, as Stavenhogen (1996: 89) put it, "why and how these conflicts develop is intimately related to the way ethnic and national identities have been constructed" in the Soviet Union.

Chapter IV - Elites: Leading the Masses or Led by Them?

The question - "do leaders lead or are they led?" raised by Dahl (1961: 325) decades ago is still a topic of much debate among scholars of the social sciences. Very few deny the crucial importance of political, military, and intellectual elites in the formation of the everyday political or social environment, but when it comes to explaining their role in conflict management and resolution, answers vary widely. Some scholars argue that ethnic and nationalist mobilisation in states like Georgia was a result of a mass hostility that ruled out compromise, and not the decisions made by the elites (Kaufman 1996, 2001; Petersen 2002). However, in this chapter I will be arguing the contrary position. Even though hostile feelings and attitudes among the masses are partially responsible for turning these conflicts violent, it was the political and military establishment as well as intelligentsia of Georgia that successfully manipulated an already existing hostility and fuelled the negative attitudes among the Georgians, Ossetians, and Abkhazians.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, former dissident and a professor of English literature before being elected the first president of independent Georgia; Vladislav Ardzinba, an historian and a Director of Abkhazian Institute of Language, Literature, and History in Sokhumi before becoming the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazian ASSR, and later the first *de-facto* president of Abkhazia (1994-2005); and Alan Chochiev, college instructor, and one of the founders and leaders of the Ossetian Popular Front - Ademon Nykhas ('Popular Shrine') formed in January 1989, were directly involved in the nationalist mythmaking long before becoming politically active (Smith *et al* 1998: 54; Kaufman 2001: 106). Therefore, chapter four will demonstrate that in Georgia's case, the answer to the above-posed question is that it is the elites who led the masses in early 1990s not vice versa.

Elites vs. the Masses

Many scholars are sceptical towards how much influence the demagogic politicians or militants have upon the masses (Kaufman 1996, 2001; Mueller 2000; Petersen 2002). They believe that portraying millions of individuals as 'mindless robots' in

the hands of manipulative elites represents an extremely simplistic and mistaken view (Sardamov 1999 cited in Petersen 2002: 36). This paper does not aim to reduce all the responsibility for the bloodshed in Georgia to only a small group of elites. The masses should share the responsibility in these conflicts as well. However, this dissertation aims to emphasise the fact that "*conflict avoidance* is a hallmark of the successful national leader" (Gleason 1990: 98, original emphasis) and as many would agree, these conflicts were not unavoidable (Natadze 2002). McGarry (1995: 134) is correct to argue that nationalist "movements cannot be mobilised out of thin air" but as demonstrated in the previous chapter, some basis for this mobilisation was already in place in Georgia. Ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences were "already salient and thus available to be politicised as ethno-nationalism" (Snyder & Ballentine 1996: 17).

There are others in academia that agree upon the crucial impact of the decisions made at certain times by the elites, but find it hard to explain the motivations of the elite groups behind these decisions (Hughes 2000). There are numerous historical as well as cultural nuances that play a role in shaping the minds of the protagonists of the conflicts (Libal 2002: 1). Many point to various socio-political and economic resources that must seem tempting to the elites at the central as well as regional levels (Gagnon 1994; Bowen 1996; Brubaker & Laitin 1998; Lynch 2000; Fearon & Laitin 2000), since especially in Georgia's case Abkhazia was considered one of the most prosperous regions of the USSR. However, no matter how sincere were Gamsakhurdia, Ardzinba, or Chochiev in fighting for the independence of their ethnic homelands, it cannot be denied that the collapse of the Soviet Union definitely aided the prospects of these and other elites in getting hold of the political and material resources of the former empire.

The emergence of a strong political and military establishment along ethnic lines in each three major centres of Georgia (Tbilisi, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali) was a direct result of the nativisation policy of the Soviet Union as argued in chapter three. It is without a doubt that structural construction of the Soviet federation presented many opportunities for these elites to exploit its institutional weaknesses. All that was necessary for them was some political space that was eventually provided by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* in mid-1980s. After this policy was instituted, armed with the "control over information through their grip on the media" (Petersen 2002:

34) elites were able to launch a mass-scale nationalist mobilisation across the whole territory of Georgia.

Anyone, who takes a closer look at available material covering the mass nationalist demonstrations and strikes of late 1980s onwards in Georgia would be amazed by exceptional charisma of nationalist leaders. Diuk and Karatnycky (1993: 148) were themselves witnesses of the enormous popularity of Gamsakhurdia back then "and how he could play to the crowds". He is believed to have said once: "it is not my wish but I cannot control this process" (Birch 1995: 94). However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the argument that elites could not control the situation at that time and that they were to respond to the nationalist demands of the masses is an absurd.

As Batiashvili, one of the leaders of the nationalist movement of Georgia and Minister of Information and Intelligence in 1992-93, has admitted in his interview with the author, people did not even know that May 26 existed (Independence Day of Georgia when the first socialist-democratic republic of Georgia gained independence from Russia's Tsarist Empire in 1918). "People knew nothing, and we, leaders of the nationalist movement, awakened in them these nationalist feelings" (*ibid*.).

Irakli Tsereteli, another leader of the nationalist movement also admits that "we were provocative too and were sometimes exaggerating events. If we would say that Merab Kostava[v] was killed, then we would make people even angrier at the communists" (Tsereteli cited in *Kviris Palitra,* 12-18 June, 2006: 15). These nationalist leaders found themselves at the zenith of their popularity, especially after the tragic events of April 9, 1989 when 21 people were killed by the Soviet troops who cracked down a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi. April 9 radicalised the masses, and those who had enough power to influence mass opinion used this occasion to discredit the image of the communist party instead.

Many argue that political leaders are often burdened by the public's unrealistic expectations of what any leader can accomplish (Goldenberg 1994: 84). Gamsakhurdia, who was elected in what was considered free and fair elections with 87 percent of the popular vote (Jones 1993: 300), might well have been restricted in his actions due to such high percentage of the vote. But on the other hand, due to

this same popularity among wide range of masses, he was the only person at that time in Georgia who could have been able to find any compromise between Georgians and ethnic minorities, and despite this, failed to do so (Kaufman 2001). In fact, it was the leaders of the nationalist movement itself who first introduced the slogan 'Georgia for Georgians!' that later became the single most often cited phrase to represent Georgia as 'a little empire' (Andrei Sakharov cited in Goldenberg 1994: 82).

A well-known Georgian philosopher was raising alarms regarding this issue back in the summer 1989: "Georgians are so taken with the idea of freedom that they have lost the ability to think rationally" (Merab Mamardashvili cited in Diuk & Karatnycky 1993: 151). Behind the rhetoric of the nationalist elites, there was no "evidence that the easy references to Western values and institutions were deeply understood or [were] more than a reservoir for anti-Soviet slogans,....[and] the level of understanding of democracy remained abysmally low at all levels of society" (Diuk & Karatnycky 1993: 149, 151). Unlike the Baltic States, a moderate, liberal intelligentsia in Georgia found itself in opposition of government, completely cut off from the political activism. As McGarry (1995: 135) argues, the problem was not that there were no liberal elites in Georgia, the problem was that they were outnumbered by radical groupings. As Roman Gotsiridze admits,

> There was a total deficit of rational thinking within the nationalist movement of Georgia. At very high political levels there were serious discussions about how Georgia would regain its lost territories to Azerbaijan and Turkey, for instance. Some politicians were seriously considering this after Georgia would gain independence ('From April 9 to April 9', 2002, television programme, Rustavi 2, Tbilisi, April 9).

While a long history of foreign invasion and a traditionally weak demographic representation in the republic's periphery urged Georgia to develop a nationalism "defensive and integrative in its intent", on the other hand, it "proved threatening to national minorities within Georgia and disintegrative in its consequences" (Toft 2002: 123). National insecurity drove Georgians to take the side of those elites who saw the new independent Georgia as a hegemony of Georgians, and as Jones (1997) argues, any opposition to this hegemony was seen as a nation betrayal and a threat to national unity (*ibid.:* 513). Georgia was believed to be a carrier of 'a superior culture' and "smaller and inferior cultures which shared Georgia's historical territory", like

that of 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia, were completely excluded from the formation of a new Georgian state (*ibid.:* 522).

The Construction of Ethnic Identities

The idea of the social construction of ethnic identities can easily be applied in Georgia's case. Elites in Georgia had an enormous influence on the construction of the opposing identities of 'us' – the Georgians, and 'others' – the Ossetians and Abkhazians, or vice versa. Unfortunately, general public opinion remains largely uninformed regarding this issue, mistakenly assuming that some social categories such as ethnic identities, "are natural, inevitable, and unchanging" (Fearon & Laitin 2000: 849).

As social constructivists would argue, just because the members of Georgian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian communities are hostile towards one another, this need not be (and in this case has not been) an eternal condition. Mass involvement in violence and support for extremism does not mean that the feelings of fears and animosities have been intrinsic within the opposing societies (*ibid.*). Ethnic violence in Georgia was not a result of "received, immutable cultural differences" between these groups, rather, ethnic as well as cultural identities have continuously been produced and reproduced in the hands of and by the elites (*ibid.:* 857, 855). Therefore, it was political and military leadership of the republic and its autonomous territories, as well as intelligentsia, who continuously inflamed and intensified hostile emotions and cultural differences before and throughout the period of violence in 1991-93.

While in Georgia's case Kaufman (2001: 86) argues that "incumbent leaders in each [ethnic group] initially tried without success, to restrain mobilisation and prevent interethnic violence", like Petersen (2002), he underestimates the strength of 'elite-persuasion' through the nationalist mythmaking and a successful exploitation of 'marketplace of ideas' (Snyder & Ballentine 1996; Snyder 2000). When the time of independence struck, the Georgian elite as well as general public found itself completely unprepared for the obstacles of an independent state (interview with Levan Berdzenishvili, former dissident and an MP from the Republican Party of Georgia). Unused to freedom of press and freedom of speech, Georgian society appeared unequipped to face the challenges provided by uncensored information. Moreover, in the absence of strong institutional mechanisms, "an increase in the

freedom of speech...create[d] an opening for nationalist mythmakers to hijack public discourse" (Snyder & Ballentine 1996: 7).

<u>Nationalist Mythmaking in Georgia</u>

Mythmaking was yet another tool successfully exploited by the elites in the construction of opposing identities.[vi]   Snyder and Ballentine (1996: 10) argue that "nationalist conflict is...the product of deliberate elite efforts to mobilise latent solidarities behind a particular political program". Radical nationalist leaders use mythmaking to develop or reinforce certain stereotypes about members of other national or ethnic groups. It has to be emphasised that this process was taking place not only at the central level in Tbilisi among ethnic Georgians, but also in autonomous territories among Ossetians and Abkhazians. Thus, the elites of all these three groups are equally to blame in mobilising people around ethno-cultural differences.

The Soviet system also aided the nurturing of mythmaking. The primordialist approach to the study of ethnicity enjoyed much popularity among the Soviet scholars, therefore, "a prestigious past was unanimously valued as a highly desirable support for arguments, which might facilitate a successful struggle for desirable privileges" (Shnirelman 2001: 4). In an atheist society like that of the Soviet Union, religion was basically substituted by "a sacred past (a myth of origins), which comes to be an important basis of ethnic identity" (*ibid.*). In Georgia as well, mythmaking was extensively used to legitimise ethnic, political, economic, social and cultural claims (*ibid.*). *Glasnost* and *perestroika* in late 1980s meant that nationalist mythmaking entered a new phase in the USSR. Visible signs of the demise of the empire and the loosening of government control over what and how things should be written about the 'histories' of Soviet peoples "has allowed local successor historiographies to become even more ethnocentric and teleological" (Smith *et al* 1998: 48).

 While political and military elites were directly responsible for stirring up these conflicts, the cultural and academic intelligentsia had just as much responsibility. In fact, it was the work of writers, historians, philologists, linguists, ethnologists, archaeologists and the like who successfully constructed ethno-genetic myths of their nations and just as successfully 'sold' it to the mass public as the received truth

(*ibid.*). Scholars and academics of Georgian as well as Ossetian and Abkhazian nationalities competed with one another in "the nationalistically inspired prostitution of philology and history" (Hewitt 1995: 56).

Georgia is indeed an excellent case for the study of the development of "how rival myths of homeland and overlapping 'claims to indigenousness'" have been used by academic and literate elites to form opposing identities of 'us' and 'others' (Esman 1985 cited in Smith *et al* 1998: 48). Cementing this sense and fear of 'otherness' was thus enhanced and elaborated in the rhetoric of political elite and brought into action by the military elite groupings. As Smith *et al* (*ibid.:* 58) argue, the main 'struggles' were regarding cultural, territorial, and state supremacy. A never-ending hysteria about whose language was culturally 'higher', who was indigenous to the disputed territories, and who founded the first states in these territories found thousands of people drawn into this madness.

At the demonstrations that were taking place so frequently in late 1980s and early 1990s it was not uncommon to hear from nationalist leaders like Gamsakhurdia issue declarations like: "Abkhazian nation has never existed historically and Abkhazia has always been western Georgia" ('Abkhazian Trap', 2002, television programme, Rustavi 2, Tbilisi, September 27).[vii] At that time it was widely believed that "whoever is older, he or she is better" (interview with Berdzenishvili). Therefore, Georgians regarded Ossetians, settling on Georgian territory only in the 17th century, as 'newcomers' and 'guests'. Being an owner of a land for a few centuries was not enough as one had to be there for millennia in order to have legitimate rights on it (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, such a narrow-minded view of history was reinforced by some of the most vocal elites of the time.

Attempts "to deepen their past on their modern territory, to demonstrate their huge contribution to Caucasus history...and to mankind in general" (the introduction of Christianity to the region) have always been a hallmark of the Caucasian mythmaking (Smith *et al* 1998: 64). In this ongoing and never ending 'competition', the lack of hard evidence about the past created a vacuum allowing the opposition sides "to consciously exaggerate their mythology, lending it fantastic features,....and to take up completely incompatible positions" (*ibid.*: 64, 58).

In the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union, "shared memories of nationally significant events provide[d] for the formation of collective identities" (Smith 2002: 4), and elites played a crucial role in the construction of these new identities in the emerging post-Soviet States. However, their role in shaping and reshaping everyday social and political life is often undervalued. National identities are often perceived "solely as some sort of mystical cultural bonds formed in the distant past" and it is often forgotten (or not fully understood) that in reality they are "something continuously under construction" (*ibid.:* 6).

Smith *et al* (1998: 66) argue that "the mythological foundations of mutual antagonism in Transcaucasia will have to be studied with care if lasting peace is to be restored to the region". I would add on my behalf that for that lasting peace, the roles of the elites should be recognised and paid their deserved attention. Future generations should realise that every word counts in such a multiethnic 'mosaic' as the Caucasus and everyone from a Georgian, Abkhazian, or an Ossetian politician to a university professor should take responsibility for what they say and write.

Chapter V - From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

Almost everyone in academic and political circles admits that there were some visible signs of a 'hidden Russian hand' in almost every conflict that developed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, even after more than a decade since the demise of the Soviet empire, international community remains silent or passive regarding Russia's involvement in late-Soviet or post-Soviet military confrontations. The Georgian public almost unanimously believes that Russia played a crucial role in the conflicts in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia (Beissinger 2005: 41). Yet others, especially in the West, believe that internal political, military, and economic factors should be blamed first in fuelling and inhabiting these conflicts (Gagnon 1994: 134; Lynch 2000: 835). However, in this chapter I will argue that the 'hidden Russian hand' was just as important in the propagation of conflicts in Georgia as the Soviet

legacy or the role of the elites. In fact, the central government of the Soviet Union and later Russian Federation in Moscow had far more crucial role to play in the conflicts of the Caucasus than is usually recognised.

There are some in Georgia who see the Soviet and later Russian KGB 'hand' in everything that went wrong in the country from the death of Merab Kostava and election of Gamsakhurdia's government to the military confrontations in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia (interview with Natadze; Gasviani & Gasviani 2005). They believe that the outcomes of these conflicts might have been very different if not direct involvement of these external forces. Today, without the archival documents of that period available for the mass public, it is difficult to argue that what happened in Georgia was following a 'script' written in the Kremlin. Some of the statements of Georgian political or public states people can indeed be considered exaggeration and even 'hysteria' towards Russia's politics in the Caucasus. However, Russias's role (in the last years and after the collapse of the Soviet Union) in the development of the political and economic processes in Georgia cannot be denied, as well as its continuous involvement in the affairs of *de facto* states of 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia. Recognising this on behalf of Russian Federation today as well as international community will be an important step taken towards the stabilisation of the Caucasus and the final resolution of its 'frozen' conflicts.

Even before its declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, it was obvious that "Georgian nationalist movement was determined to make a clean break from Russian domination" (Aves 1996: 180). However, not only were there very few clear alternatives, but also shortly after electing Gamsakhurdia as the head of the state, Georgia found itself completely isolated from international community due to his government's chauvinistic policies (*ibid.:* 181). In such a difficult political situation Russia had all the necessary space and power to influence Georgia with all the possible means, economic or military, to solidify the country within its sphere of influence in a new post-Soviet geopolitical environment. It should be emphasised that by admitting Russia's obvious interest in and influence on the deepening of the violent military conflicts on the territory of Georgia, I by no means blame the whole outbreak of the wars on Russia or diminish the role of the Georgian government or opposing parties in it. Rather, I argue that while Georgian authorities themselves created an excellent environment for foreign forces to interfere, Russia manipulated

the local opposition and used the Tsarist and Soviet tactic of 'divide and rule' quite successfully.

As Goltz (1993: 92) argues, "no colonial power…has ever voluntarily and peacefully relinquished its previous sphere of influence, and the crumbling of the Russian-led Soviet empire is yet another case of painful decolonisation". It was obvious that Russia, with a "marked continuation of a Soviet worldview" (March 2006: 102) and with two *krais* and 8 autonomous republics of the north Caucasus being part of the Russian Federation, would not give up its influence in such a strategically important region. In the south, in Transcaucasia, Georgia was an important 'bridge' to the Black Sea region as well as to the Middle East. Therefore, allowing Georgia not to take up the membership in the CIS (a regional organisation that consists of all the former Soviet Union countries) would have been a direct 'capitulation' – potentially leaving the whole region closely aligned to the West.

Goltz (1993) has personally witnessed Russian interference in the notorious Abkhazian war while in Sokhumi as a war correspondent (*ibid.:* 104). In his 1993 article for *Foreign Policy* he demonstrates well the inability of the U.N. representatives in Abkhazia to prove Russian activities in that war despite open declarations on behalf of Russian military personnel regarding Russia's 'strategic interests' and 'zones of influence' in the region. "Abkhazian coastline would make a fine replacement for territory lost to Moscow when Ukraine became an independent state in 1991" stated one of the generals of Russian army (*ibid.:* 108). Even though these intentions were clear and well-known to anyone more or less familiar to the geo-political prospects of the Caucasus, until now very few dare to openly condemn Russia in interfering in the interior affairs of its former colonies:

> There is not a civil war or separatist conflict in the former Soviet Union without them…they are the Russians, or some of them – representatives of the former Soviet armed forces who are now being encouraged, or ordered, to stir the political pot in the newly independent states along the frontier of the erstwhile Soviet empire (*ibid.:* 92).

Stirring 'the political pot' in those countries who wished to leave Moscow's orbit of influence involved encouraging and supporting separatist movements under the cover of self-determination while denying the same right to 21 autonomous republics within its 'federation' (*ibid.*). Now, as over a decade has passed since the Georgian

central government lost control over 18% of its territory ('South Ossetia' and Abkhazia), high ranking political and military elites in both Georgia and Russia have started talking openly about certain aspects of these conflicts. It no longer is a secret that the Russian military establishment encouraged and assured the central government of Georgia that the only way to maintain the territorial integrity of the state was through a military intervention in Abkhazia (*Akhali Versia,* 7-13 June, 2004: 9).

In their interviews with the author, both Batiashvili and Karkarashvili (Commander-in-Chief of Georgian armed forces in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia and Minister of Defence of Georgia in 1993-94), argue that the opposite side in both ethnic conflicts of Georgia were not Ossetians and Abkhazians, but Russians. Russian armed forces assured Georgia that they would take the central government's side in possible conflicts with the separatists. By giving away the military equipment of the Soviet army's Akhaltsikhe Division #10 to Georgia, they made a strong statement to take Georgia's side in the Georgian-Abkhazian 'Citrus War', as it would be later labelled. But, as it became clear during the escalation of violence, it was not only Georgians who were getting 'help' from Russians.

Former Soviet army forces formerly based in Sokhumi were aiding the Abkhazians as well, but unlike in 'South Ossetia', where "ethnic Russians from the right-wing Russian National Legion had participated in the war...there were indications in Abkhazia that Russian involvement meant more than a few renegade soldiers" (Goldenberg 1994: 108). A decade later, Georgia's second president in 1995-2003 Eduard Shevardnadze (2006) would admit that the

> Abkhazian war as well as its loss was caused by the double-standards of Russian politics, human resources of the North Caucasian rebels, Russian arms and financial supplies, Russian military troops directly taking part in violent confrontations, and their direct or indirect support of the separatists (*Kviris Palitra,* May 8-14, 2006: 11).

In fact, Georgia's defeat was almost entirely due to the reinforcements from Russia who "was not acting in a neighbourly fashion...but was intent on defending its own interests as the regional great power" (Goldenberg 1994: 108). Shevardnadze (2006) even recalls how his old friend and an ideological ally – Aleksandr Rutskoy, Vice-President of Russian Federation in 1991-93 threatened him to personally order the

bombardment of Tbilisi while he was trying to settle conflict in 'South Ossetia' (*Kviris Palitra,* 15-21 May, 2006: 31). Though the Russians never bombed Tbilisi, with the order of the Deputy Minister Kondrashov Russian air forces attacked the Georgian National Army located in Tskhinvali region. At the same time, Russia postponed the discussion of Georgia's admission process in the United Nations (*ibid.*).

It was in Russia's direct interest to prolong violent military confrontations on Georgian territory that would use all the material and human resources of the Georgian government, making both them and the separatist regions more dependent on their northern neighbour. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Kremlin orchestrated the military *coup* of Gamsakhurdia's government, which left downtown Tbilisi destroyed and killed 200 people in a fortnight. This event also served as a foundation for the beginning of a civil war among government forces and supporters of ex-president. State Secretary of the Russian Federation, Gennady Burbulis, the second in command and Yeltsin's favourite in government, would publicly admit later that he coordinated the Tbilisi *putsch* from Moscow ('Locked Circle: War in Tbilisi', 2002, television programme, Rustavi 2, Tbilisi, November 29).

Yet another example of Russia's active engagement in the conflict was in summer 1993 when Karkarashvili and Batiashvili, Georgia's Defence and State Security Ministers respectively, met with Pavel Grachev, the Defence Minister of the Russian Federation in 1992-96. In order to achieve a ceasefire between Georgians and Abkhazians, Grachev was demanding permission for 30,000 Russian troops to enter the country and remain on Georgian territory. Otherwise, he was warning, the Abkhazian capital Sokhumi would fall to Abkhazians on September 19 ('Abkhazian Trap', 2002, television programme, Rustavi 2, Tbilisi, September 27). Georgian side could not have accepted this offer as it would have led to an informal annexation of the country by the Russians. Sokhumi did not 'fall' on the 19th but it did on September 27. "Everything was written beforehand in the military headquarters in Moscow", says Batiashvili in the interview with the author. Karkarashvili also admits that "whose side Russia would take in these conflicts was of crucial importance...unfortunately they allied with the separatists" (interview with the author).

In his recently published memoirs - *Thoughts About the Past and the Future* – Shevardnadze (2006) publicly discloses the Russian 'solutions' and their 'peacekeeping' actions in Georgia during the uprising of president Gamsakhurdia's followers in Samegrelo (home-region of the first president):

> The map of Georgia was divided in two parts with a red marker. The line was going along Tsipi Tunnel which divides Western and Eastern parts of the country.
>
> 'There is no other way out', he [Yeltsin] told me, 'Let Zviad rule Western Georgia, and you the capital in the East'.
>
> What are you saying, is this serious? – I asked him astonished and horrified.
>
> 'I am very serious. I just do not see any other way out'.
>
> That is not a help.
>
> 'A good advice is also a help', he said annoyed
>
> (*Kviris Palitra,* May 8-14, 2006: 11).

After this, Hewitt's (1995: 70) argument that Shevardnadze, who supposedly "had the covert support of Yeltsin" in 'ethnic-cleansing' of Abkhazians and who "grossly miscalculated the power of independence-driven freedom-fighters against evil Georgian nationalist machine", seems rather biased. Calling the early 1990s Georgian-Russian relationship "the Russo-Georgian axis" is also a certain overstatement. Yeltsin neither sought nor needed Shevadnadze's consent in provoking full-scale wars in Chechnya on two different occasions, as Hewitt (*ibid.:* 71) argues. The reason why Shevardnadze might have become "one of the most vocal of all CIS leaders in supporting Russian actions in Chechnya" (Aves 1996: 183) seems quite obvious, however. With two break-away regions within his country's borders Shevardnadze could not have possibly supported Chechnya's separatism, however legitimate.

Much of the decisions made by the leaders of the nationalist movement of Georgia and later by the official authorities in Tbilisi after the opposition to the communist party came to power, encouraged, or rather, assisted Soviet and later Russian political and military elites in pursuing their *divide and rule* policies in the Caucasus. In addition, international political environment was not much help either. In 1991

while the world watched in astonishment how the world's largest land empire was coming apart, the member republics of the Soviet Union as well as other states found themselves totally unprepared for the revision of state borders after the collapse of the USSR (Molashvili 2000: 80). Just like back in early 1990s, a decade later as well, international community continues to ignore "an increasing Russia 'problem'…giving Russia a free hand in its self-declared sphere of influence" in the 'near abroad' (March 2006: 113).

The defeat in 'South Ossetian' and Abkhazian military conflicts, the worst economic performance, and the highest inflation rate in the former Soviet space forced Georgia to sign the treaty creating the CIS in 1993 (Aves 1996: 177-178). Yet, another victory of Russia over Georgia was March 1995 agreement establishing 4 Russian military bases on Georgian territory: one outside of Tbilisi and others in Akhalkalaki, Batumi, and Gudauta (*ibid.:* 183). Therefore, I argued in this chapter that more than what the western scholars or journalists often call "the familiar paranoia about the dark hand of the 'centre'" (Goltz 1993: 93), the former Soviet Union countries' fears and complaints regarding 'post-imperial' politics of Russia are not always only imagination of demagogic politicians. In depth analysis of the material available so far, as well as interviews and memoirs of the key players of those times gives us an opportunity to argue that it was in Russia's direct interest to deepen the already existing tensions between Georgians and Ossetians and Georgians and Abkhazians, and that it was directly involved in the military confrontations among these groups in early 1990s.

Chapter VI – Conclusion

Scholars of ethnic conflict have focused on the Balkan region extensively in the post-Soviet era, then Chechnya when that conflict began, but despite some available scholarship on the wars in the Caucasus, Georgia has often been overlooked or seen as a small-scale version of ethnic warfare. Despite the lack of statistical information, the estimated number of deaths on Georgian territory during these conflicts is 30,000 with more than 250,000 people being internally displaced - refugees in their own country (King 2005: 172). These numbers may not seem very impressive

compared to other conflicts, but for a small country like Georgia the repercussions will last for generations to come. As I have argued in this paper, more attention should be paid to studying Georgia in late 1980s and early 1990s as this country is an excellent case study for those interested in Soviet or post-Soviet studies and in nationalism and war in general.

In just three years between 1991 and 1993, the citizens of Georgia witnessed a military *coup-d'etat,* two violent ethnic wars in two autonomous territories, and a simultaneous civil war between government forces and supporters of the first president Gamsakhurdia. With this record, Georgia definitely takes up a notorious first place among 15 former Soviet republics. It is also a good example of how wrong things can go when the political and military elite exploit institutional weakness of a state and decide to play the nationalist card in a multi-national and multi-ethnic region with a constant threat of foreign interference.

The paper focused on the initial question of why did inter and intra-ethnic conflicts turn violent in Georgia and what role did nationalism play in fuelling this violence? The answer(s) led me to focus on what I thought were three most important factors – institutions, elites, and external forces - in turning unification nationalism into irredentist and peripheral nationalisms in Georgia. The research done for this paper also led me to conclude that like in other parts of the former Soviet Union, 'ethnic' conflicts in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia were successfully constructed artificially, and that none of the causes of these conflicts can be traced to intrinsic cultural differences between different ethnic groups.

In this dissertation I have not delved into a detailed description of the actual process of the events that shaped much of Georgia's modern history even though each one of these events played a crucial role in the outcome of the conflicts. Likewise, I have not studied any of many key players in depth. Some were more important than others in terms of their impact on the historical events, but all of them helped to create those events that unfolded in Georgia at the dusk of the socialist-communist regime. Rather, I have focused on the role of institutions, elites, and external forces in general, and have demonstrated that there is never a single factor that causes conflict, but a combination of multiple factors. As Sakwa (2000: 202) argues "any attempt to prioritise one element over all the others risks seriously distorting the true

picture".   Therefore, it is crucial for future scholarship to study these three determinants within one framework.

This paper has also argued that Georgia is an excellent example of the 'absurdity' of the myth of ethnic warfare that many scholars have studied previously (Bowen 1996, Sadowski 1998, Mueller 2000).   In response to the questions raised earlier in the introduction of this dissertation, I have showed that even in such a poly-ethnic and poly-religious place like the Caucasus region, nationalism cannot be considered a chronic danger to the peace.   There should always be certain conditions present in order for ethnic and nationalist sentiments to evoke violence, and in post-Soviet space these conditions have almost always been the above-mentioned three.

People do not just start killing each other overnight.   Ordinary people living next to one another peacefully for decades start committing extraordinary acts of violence only after years and even decades of accumulating grievances.   The Soviet Union was an incubator of such grievances.   In a totalitarian regime such as the USSR there was no healthy way of voicing ones complaints via political activism.   Therefore, the uprising of the nationalities in the Soviet Union at the end of 1980s was mostly due to its experimental nationality policy, becoming the single most important factor in the collapse of the Soviet regime.   This policy, largely contradictory in many ways, was giving a legitimate right of existence to about 127 officially recognised national and ethnic groups while at the same time aiming to fuse them all together in one Soviet identity.

In a heterogeneous state such as Georgia, with "artificially constructed boundaries and territories", where the concept of the 'nation-state' was "in sharp opposition to that of the 'ethnic nation'" (Smith 1986: 242-243), it was obvious that the Soviet legacy would leave its dark mark.   After gaining independence from the USSR, Georgia found itself within a large group of states in which "a dominant culture-community must accommodate the demands of 'peripheral' *ethnie*" (*ibid.:* 229).

Formal as well as informal institutionalisation of ethnicity and nationality at republican levels provided the basis for the politisation of ethnicity in the Soviet Union.   In addition, territorialisation of the concept of ethnicity aided the formation of national consciousness within different ethnic groups.   Finally, the nativisation policy encouraged the use of local national languages and the promotion of national

cadres. In an atheist, 'classless' society where religion could not be openly exercised and where it was impossible to divide societies among the classes, people became easily alienated along ethnic and cultural lines.

Here arises another question that the paper was handling. How did other former Soviet republics with the same Soviet nationality policy 'hangover' manage to avoid violence in the conflicts? As discussed in the second chapter, here analysts most frequently bring examples of the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan who were able to successfully accommodate separatist claims of a very large minority of Russians. My argument in this regard was that the difference lies with the actions of the elites in the political arena, the very same elites who were part of the notorious Soviet *nomenklatura,* nurtured by the nativisation policy of the same system. The political and military elites as well as historians, linguists and other members of intelligentsia in Tbilisi, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali are equally to be blamed in isolating Georgian, Abkhazian, and Ossetian communities along opposing groups of 'us' and 'others'.

While nobody dares to completely exclude the role of the elites in ethnic conflicts, some have serious doubts about how much influence do they really have over the masses (Kaufman 1996, 2001; Petersen 2002). In his interview with the author, political scientist and head of the local think tank Davit Darchiashvili has argued that even though the Gamsakhurdia factor was indeed crucial in the development of the processes in Georgia in early 1990s, if he had not engaged in this behaviour personally, there would always be somebody else, and that him gaining the power was the result of the overall political environment of that decade. Kaufman (2001: 105) also argues that the escalation of violence in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia resulted from mass-led political pressures, "not because the Georgian government was nationalist, but because it was under pressure from nationalist demonstrators and hunger strikes". On the contrary, as I have argued in chapter four, rather than "responding to its people's fear of extinction" (*ibid.:* 111), the nationalist leaders in Georgia and its autonomous territories were personally responsible for encouraging this fear of extinction within the society.

Unlike Kaufman (1996, 2001), I have argued that Georgia is a good case-study for studying elite-led nationalism and its consequences rather than mass-led

nationalism. The evidence I have provided in this paper demonstrates that in Georgia's case, the elites were more leading the masses than being led by them. The elite groups in Tbilisi as well as in autonomous territories of 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia rallied their ethnic brethren along ethnic lines, and therefore they all should take responsibility in the breakout of violence.

The Georgian political establishment fought in defence of Georgian national identity to counteract the Sovietisation and Russification policies of the Soviet Union. At the same time, they fought for policies of Georgianisation at a sub-state level within the USSR. On the other hand, Ossetian and Abkhazian leaders fought against the threat they saw in these policies that they believed to be favouring ethnic Georgians at a central level of the republic. For ethnic minorities in Georgia, the Kremlin was perceived as a protectorate of their ultimate existence (Coppieters n.d.). However, with the demise of the USSR, this favouritism quickly shifted to the newly emerged Russian Federation. Local elites used this occasion to make the clear break with Tbilisi that was denying them the government positions they would otherwise have in an independent Ossetia or Abkhazia.

Glasnost gave those elites that last tool they lacked – the freedom of speech and freedom of press. Afterwards it was easy to find a testing ground among the vast majority of public, who were politically completely uneducated and unaware of the situation beyond the 'iron curtain', for a successful marketplace of ideas. Unused to *glasnost,* everything that was said in papers or by the leaders themselves was believed to be true (Kaufman 2001: 103). This paper does not deny that there are certain occasions when the elites have no control over the circumstances, but in late 1980s and early 1990s it was the elites who were in charge of the situation. Gamsakhurdia, Ardzinba, and others could have cooled down the political situation if they wished due to their enormous popularity among their ethnic counterparts, but instead they initiated a fierce competition over legislature, history, and language.

It is the elites, not only political but representatives of intelligentsia as well, who are continuously involved in the construction of continuously changing concepts of ethnicity and nationality. And it was the very same elites who over the years, and even the decades, successfully constructed the hatreds between different ethnic groups by praising one ethnic or national group and completely diminishing the

value of others through various means – arguments concerning indigenousness and the establishment of the first state on the present-day Georgia, or disagreements whose language was more ancient. If anything, the violence in Georgia was the result of these elites manipulating with mass national sentiments and using their public standing for persuasive purposes. Therefore, equipped with mythmaking tools, elites served as mediators between nationalism and war by turning healthy national feelings to mass inter- and intra-ethnic hostility.

Lastly, the paper touches upon the crucial factor of external forces – that of the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation. "Do not blame Russia and Russians in all that went wrong in Georgia" is the phrase directed to Georgians that one would hear the most from Russian politicians as well as academics. Indeed, blaming external forces when there were so many internal factors present seems somewhat inappropriate. If Georgia is looking towards a peaceful, long-term resolution of these conflicts in the near future than its political and military establishment, as well as scholars of the modern history of the country, should admit first the mistakes of Georgian government in early 1990s. However, Russia played a role much more crucial than many would like to admit. Its political interest in the Caucasus did not dissolve overnight after the collapse of the USSR, and the double standards of its politics continued to influence the periods before, during, and after the break-up of these conflicts. Once again, Georgia is a good example here of how hostile nationalist feelings can be provoked or intensified when a security dilemma arises from the threat of foreign interference.

'Nationalism' showed both of its conflicting faces in the case of Georgia. Nationalist feelings helped ethnic Georgians to unite against common enemy – the Soviet Union. However, at the same time, those feelings turned hostile towards ethnic minorities who were against Georgia's independence from the USSR. Georgia never fully realised the importance of a prerequisite for a nation-building process: the difference between 'an *ethnie*' and 'a nation' for Georgian nationalism was only for Georgians, in fact, for Orthodox Christians only (interview with Berdzenishvili). Unfortunately, Gamsakhurdia failed to offer citizens of Georgia a 'liberal' definition of a nation, based not on blood and ethnicity but on citizenship "linked together by the community of language, culture and ideal" (Segars 2003: 84).

Both Georgians on the one hand and Ossetians and Abkhazians on the other are to blame equally in fuelling these conflicts. While central government of Georgia was unable to provide 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia with a stable social, political, and economic situation after gaining long-awaited independence, Ossetian and Abkhazian leaders, on the other hand, were unable to provide their people with "a stable and defensible political framework" outside Georgia or with "some kind of *modus vivendi* within" it (Seely 2001: 1-2).

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[i] In fact, Alter (1989: 2) argues, that nationalism has "a multitude of manifestations... [therefore]...it is more appropriate to speak of *nationalisms* in the plural than of *nationalism* in the singular" (original emphasis).

[ii] Theories, identified by Snyder (2000) as 'ancient hatreds' and 'elite persuasion' are also often referred to as 'essentialism' and 'instrumentalism' respectively (Varshney 2002: 27-30).

[iii] Capital cities of Georgia, Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Autonomous Region of 'South Ossetia', and Russia respectively.

[iv] *Mkhedrioni*, (meaning 'Horsemen' in Georgian) was led by a warlord Jaba Ioseliani, imprisoned for bank robbery and manslaughter for many years, and considered to be a so-called 'thief of the law' (Wheatley 2005: 45-46).

[v] Former dissident and a popular leader of the nationalist movement of Georgia, Kostava died in a tragic car accident on October 13, 1989 and was widely believed to have been killed.

[vi] Snyder and Ballentine (1996: 10) define nationalist mythmaking as "the attempt to use dubious arguments to mobilise support for nationalist doctrines or to discredit opponents".

[vii] In the interview with the author, one of the founders and leaders of the Popular Front of Georgia Nodar Natadze argues that this statement, often made by the nationalist leaders at the demonstrations, was misinterpreted, and that saying that Abkhazian nation does not exist does not mean that Abkhazian people do not exist either. However, whatever was the true meaning behind such statements, it raised legitimate fears among Abkhazians and was used by their elites to mobilise the masses.

Appendix 1

Interviews with:

Batiashvili, Irakli – leader of the nationalist movement of Georgia in late 1980s-early 1990s; former Minister of Information and Intelligence of Georgia in 1992-93. Interviewed on May 31, 2006

Berdzenishvili, Levan – former dissident; Member of the Parliament of Georgia from the Republican Party since 2004. Interviewed on July 23, 2006

Darchiashvili, Davit – political scientist; Director of the Open Society-Georgia Foundation. Interviewed on July 24, 2006

Karkarashvili, Giorgi (Gia) – former Commander-in-Chief of Georgian armed forces in 'South Ossetia' and Abkhazia; former Minister of Defence of Georgia in 1993-94. Interviewed on June 1, 2006

Natadze, Nodar – one of the founders and leaders of the Georgian Popular Front in 1989; Chairman of the Popular Party of Georgia. Interviewed on August 9, 2006

Some or all of the following questions were asked to the interviewees:

1) Generally, when scholars talk about ethnic and nationalist conflicts they either attribute the causes of violence to centuries-old ethnic hatreds or blame the military and political establishment. What do you think about these statements? What were the causes of violent clashes between Georgians and Ossetians, and Georgians and Abkhazians?

2) Scholars and analysts writing on Georgia consider the Tbilisi Tragedy of April 9 [1989] as a defining moment in modern history of Georgia. Many believe that the brutality of Soviet troops towards unarmed civilians that night, literally overnight totally radicalised the masses, aligning them towards the more radical wing of the nationalist movement. The opposition as well was not willing to negotiate with the local communist authorities on any issue any more. What is your opinion about this?

3) Georgia is often compared to the Baltic States, where the Popular Front headed by moderate liberal leaders was able to avoid clashes between different ethnic groups. What was the reason of the failure of the Georgian side in this regard?

5) What can you say about the Gamsakhurdia factor? Slogans such as 'Georgia for Georgians' evoked some of the worst reactions from the West. Do you think it were mostly his policies that alienated Georgia from international community?

6) In your opinion, how did Adjara manage to avoid being drawn into violence during those turbulent times? Do you think it was indeed impossible to mobilise locals in Adjara against central government in Tbilisi?

7) Some argue that while Abkhazians were more organised, 'South Ossetia' did not have a charismatic leader. What can you say about the elites of 'South Ossetia', and Alan Chochiev in particular?

Appendix 2

Political Map of Transcaucasia

Note: Abkhazskaya – Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia

Adzharskaya – Autonomous Republic of Adjara

Yugo-Osetinskaya A. O. – Autonomous Region *(Oblast)* of South Ossetia

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