## Chapter 5

# Armenia and Azerbaijan

## *How to Search for a Common Border*

> In the past, the first reason for misunderstandings was the century-old tradition of the nomad population. . . . The second reason was the small quantity of pastures. . . . The last reason was the lack of field surveyors.
>
> —Yakov Kochetkov, 1924

The southern part of the Caucasus region was the odd man out in the Soviet state. Here, in contrast to the Russian-Ukrainian borderland or Central Asia, Soviet power did not have to promote a national framework. Nationally and religiously perceived dichotomies already permeated everyday life. This was due in particular to the rise of industrialization and increasing urbanization during the late tsarist era. Moreover, conflicting religious faiths and economic structures contributed to the formation of differences perceived as national. The party and state leadership in Moscow was well aware of the tensions in the region, but they preferred not to be bothered and established an intermediary supervisory body—first the Kavbiuro and then the Zakkraikom.

The South Caucasus was dominated by three major national communities. According to the 1926 census, 5.9 million people or roughly 4 percent of the Soviet Union's population lived there in largely compact regions: 1.8 million Georgians, 1.3 million Armenians, and 1.7 million Turks. At the time, the term "Azerbaijan" referred only to a region and not to a certain nationality. Smaller communities like the Abkhaz, Ossetians, Lezgins, or Talysh made up a little more than half a million people. Russians and Ukrainians counted for about 400,000 people spread out over the region.[1]

To date, researchers have focused mainly on those issues of autonomy that have continued to trouble the region well into the twenty-first century. Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia are the most prominent examples.[2] After all, the ZSFSR, like the RSFSR, embraced numerous autonomous oblasti and republics. Arsène Saparov has concluded that the formation of autonomous territories such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia were a means of conflict resolution, while Svante Cornell argues that the very existence of autonomous entities within the South Caucasian republics facilitated the escalation of ethnic conflicts during the dissolution of the USSR.[3] Krista A. Goff and Jamil Hasanli have provided an in-depth analysis of the development of the national minorities in Soviet Azerbaijan, the intricate interplay of state promotion and discrimination, and the long-term effects of Soviet nationality policies.[4] However, this focus on the autonomous areas and national minorities in the South Caucasus narrows the scope too much, and the problematic institutionalization of the borders between the federal republics, particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan, slip easily out of sight.

Republican territorialization in the South Caucasus can best be analyzed from two perspectives: that of border formation and that of border crossings. First, it is necessary to recapitulate the most important political and social developments within the region between 1918 and 1920. They shaped the mindsets and challenges that the Bolsheviks faced as they conquered the region in 1920–1921. After that, I give three different but interconnected examples of how border disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan were managed in the 1920s. Finally, I analyze how the creation of national territories affected a space where a considerable part of the population was mobile.

## An Oddity within the Soviet State

As a center of the global oil industry, Baku had been a vibrant hotbed of modernity since the late nineteenth century.[5] The town was multiethnic, and it was here that tensions between predominantly skilled Christian Armenian clerks and largely unskilled Turkish-speaking Muslim workers first began to mount.[6] From 1904 to 1906 the city was an epicenter of violence between the Armenian and Muslim communities. The urban masses were often politicized along national lines. The Social Democratic party Hummet (Endeavor) and later the nationalist party Musavat (Equality) found success among the Turkish-speaking

Muslim communities, while the Dashnaktsutiun (Revolutionary Federation) played a similar role among the Armenians. Transnationally oriented political factions like the Bolsheviks were marginal by comparison with their nationalist opponents.[7] The Georgian communities also developed a national movement, in which the Menshevik Social Democrats enjoyed particular influence after 1917. Its center was Tiflis, the capital of the viceroyalty (*namestnichestvo*), the imperial administrative center for the Caucasus region.[8] Reinforced by atrocities during the First World War and the Civil War and subsequent mass displacements and resettlements, national dichotomies had not only solidified in the urban centers but spread into the countryside as well.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire and the rise of the Bolsheviks in Petrograd, politicians in the South Caucasus had to find a practical answer to the new geopolitical situation. On 9 March 1917 (22 March 1917, New Style), the Provisional Government in Petrograd installed the Ozakom, the Special Transcaucasian Committee, which was intended to replace the imperial viceroyalty. In November, after the Bolshevik coup, this committee refused to recognize Russia's new rulers. Renaming itself the Transcaucasian Commissariat, officials in Tiflis established an independent government for the region. Then, on 22 April 1918, Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani representatives agreed to form a Transcaucasian Federation. Under pressure from the Ottoman Empire and Germany—with whom the Transcaucasian Federation was still at war—this supranational state collapsed within a month, and the three republics declared their independence.[9] The Central Powers considered it more advantageous to sign separate peace treaties in Batum in June 1918 and therefore play the three against one another, particularly as they soon were entangled in territorial disputes. Armenia was in the worst position, as it found itself in a three-front conflict with Azerbaijan over the areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, Kazakh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan; with Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk) over Kars; and with Georgia over the Lori, Borchaly, and Akhalkalaki.[10]

The Bolsheviks briefly seized power in Baku in April 1918 but were cut off from the Azerbaijani hinterland. Even though the Bolsheviks strove to enlist the town's different communities in their cause, the Baku Commune under Stepan Shaumian was broadly seen as pro-Armenian among the Turkish-speaking population. After four months, the commune collapsed in the wake of simultaneous advances by Ottoman forces on one hand and British troops on the other. Most of the

members of its government (the so-called twenty-six Baku commissars) were captured and shot by British troops. After a short interlude under the Centrocaspian Dictatorship, which benefited from British support and supervision, the Azerbaijani government, based primarily in Yelizavetpol' (today Gəncə), was able to take Baku with the help of Ottoman troops in late September 1918. The city's capture was followed by a major pogrom against the city's Armenian inhabitants.[11]

In Tiflis the Georgian Mensheviks succeeded in establishing a fairly stable democratic government after a general election.[12] Noe Zhordania, one of their leaders, took office as prime minister in June 1918. His government first tried to gain German support, then, once the Germans were defeated, recognition from the Allied powers. Surrounded by shattered empires, Georgia and Armenia in December 1918 plunged into a short war over territory that resulted in approximately one thousand casualties.[13] Under pressure from the British government, the parties agreed to a ceasefire and the establishment of a neutral zone in the Georgian-Armenian borderland.[14]

About two years after the debacle of the Baku Commune, the Red Army conquered the South Caucasian republics. Azerbaijan's oil fields were, of course, the primary objective behind this campaign. In early 1920 the Red Army was victorious in almost every theater of war, but the Soviet war economy required cheap oil. Baku's oil fields were easy to exploit, but they could be used efficiently only if the hinterland and the supply lines—such as the Baku-Batumi railway—were under Soviet control as well.[15] In April 1920 the Red Army thus attacked Azerbaijan and occupied Baku. In that same December the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity to take over the Armenian Republic, suffering under a Turkish invasion. In the first months of 1921 the Red Army then launched an invasion of Georgia and drove Zhordania's Menshevik government into exile. Even though Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia remained formally independent Soviet republics, RSFSR people's commissariats were soon interfering with their railway administration, as well as the telegraph and the postal systems, to secure the transport of petroleum.[16] Most people in positions of responsibility were party members and adhered to the party line as dictated from Moscow. The Kavbiuro, led by Sergo Ordzhonikidze, fulfilled the role of intermediary, like the Turkbiuro.

The fate of the South Caucasus revealed the limits of the Paris Peace Conference. For example, during negotiations for the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire, representatives of the Entente

foresaw eastern Anatolia as a future part of Armenia, which they called Wilsonian Armenia. However, even before the treaty could be signed, this future order was already being undermined by two developments: Red Army successes in the Russian Civil War and the rebellion of Turkish nationalist forces under Mustafa Kemal against Entente occupation. Having toppled the Ottoman government, these nationalist forces began to press deeper into Anatolia's east. The Soviet government and the Turkish nationalists both saw the terms of the Sèvres treaty as an existential threat. This shared interest found expression in two peace treaties, one signed in Moscow in March 1921 and the other in Kars in October 1921. Here the RSFSR and the three South Caucasian Soviet governments made far-reaching territorial concessions, particularly at the expense of Wilsonian Armenia.[17] The two treaties not only ignored the Entente's plan but even left the previously Russian imperial province of Kars to the new Turkish state. The three satellite republics in the South Caucasus had no choice but to accept the outcome.[18] Their communist leaders had to play by the rules.

To better coordinate the economy, reduce ethnic tensions, and consolidate power, the Bolsheviks pressured the three republics of the South Caucasus to form a federation.[19] The Georgian Soviet government, in particular, followed unilateral policies in foreign trade and on monetary issues. On learning that the Georgian government was still patrolling its inter-republican borders, Moscow intervened directly.[20] Such unilateral measures ran counter to Moscow's general line, as this intervention might be seen as a direct form of foreign rule and play into the nationalists' hands.[21] The three Soviet republics thus formed the Federative Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia (FSSSRZ) on 12 March 1922, with Tiflis as its administrative seat.[22] When this structure proved to be dysfunctional, Ordzhonikidze lobbied for a more centralized federal project to facilitate the export of oil products. In this cause, he enlisted Lenin's support.[23] In October 1922 a majority of the Georgian party leadership resigned to protest this more centralized federation, fearing their republic would end up being marginalized.[24] This conflict later became known as the "Georgian affair," mentioned above. Despite the resignations, the more centralized Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, the ZSFSR, took shape on 13 December 1922.[25] The scholar Stephen Blank sees in the ZSFSR the creation of a model of centralization that would later characterize Stalinist rule.[26] Tiflis allegedly became "an imperial center in its own right."[27] However, in daily practice centralization would often

remain a paper tiger. Republican functionaries proved able to maintain their agency in everyday political affairs, as long as the party via the Zakkraikom did not intervene directly.

The three members of the ZSFSR jealously guarded their privileges. The constitution granted them the prerogative in areas such as education, justice, health care, and agriculture. The federation's main task was to coordinate the South Caucasian economy, keep Baku's oil flowing, and handle the all too many disputes among the republics. Moscow even made some concessions. Ultimately, it gave more in subsidies to the South Caucasus than to any other region. Such measures were to safeguard the political stability of this geopolitically sensitive region. The South Caucasus was thus one of the most privileged regions within the entire Soviet state, politically as well as financially.[28]

Despite these privileges, the region remained far from politically stable. In August 1924 an insurgent movement shook Georgia, in particular the regions of Guria, Imereti, and Kakheti. This uprising had the support of the Georgian government in exile. At the beginning, it seemed possible that this rebellion might overthrow Soviet power, but the Red Army rallied to crush the rebels with the utmost ferocity. Around ten thousand people died in battle and during the repressive measures that followed.[29] The Bolsheviks understood that the existing Soviet order could collapse at any moment. Rebellions seemed imminent in Armenia and Azerbaijan as well. Thus the party tried to consolidate its rule in the region through a policy of carrot and stick.[30]

The Armenian Bolsheviks faced particular challenges. Among the South Caucasian republics, Armenia was the smallest and economically the weakest. It also had the lowest number of inhabitants, a large part of whom had experienced repeated displacement and resettlement between 1915 and 1921.[31] Despite these disadvantages, it had to deal with thousands of refugees still arriving from the former Ottoman Empire and Greece. Some fifty thousand Armenian refugees settled in the Republic of Armenia between 1921 and 1927.[32] This number may not seem high in absolute terms, but it was a considerable challenge for a war-torn country with only 880,000 inhabitants in 1926. It would be wrong, however, to view Armenia and Armenians as marginalized within the Soviet framework. Relative to the size of their population, Armenians were overrepresented in federal institutions—for instance, in the ZakTsIK administration—while Turks were severely underrepresented.[33] In the eyes of some Bolsheviks, the Armenians came close to

being an "oppressor nationality" like the Russians, a nationality the party did not need to promote as such.[34]

The Muslim Turks presented the party with a broad array of challenges. Illiteracy among this part of the South Caucasian population was extremely high, making it exceedingly difficult for socialist propaganda to reach them.[35] Furthermore, around a third of the population in Azerbaijan had a nonsedentary way of life. Due to climatic conditions, the nomadic population and its cattle had to wander from summer pastures to winter pastures and back again. This made the Muslim herdsmen appear particularly backward. As a result, the party dedicated special attention to their advancement. They did not want to repeat the mistakes committed by the Baku Commune, mistakes that had alienated the Muslim population.[36] As a backward and "oppressed" nationality, the Muslim Turks benefited in particular from the affirmative policies enacted in the South Caucasus.[37]

## Puzzling Borders

All of the regional state functionaries had to play the game and follow the supervision of the intermediary party body. The Kavbiuro was initially the highest party organ for the entire Caucasus region. Sergo Ordzhonikidze served as its head from 1920 to 1922. Then, in March 1922, the party restructured its intermediary agency and formed a committee for the South Caucasus exclusively: the Zakkraikom, which Ordzhonikidze also chaired until 1926.[38] By virtue of this post, he was able to act as the party's regional strongman. Despite his undiplomatic manners, or because of them, he implemented and supervised Soviet power as Moscow required.

The party immediately found itself confronted with serious territorial conflicts. Immediately after their Sovietization, the three South Caucasian republics clearly lacked defined borders. Party organs had to make some tough decisions: the regions of Nakhichevan and Kazakh were attached to Azerbaijan, Zangezur and Lori to Armenia, as well as Borchaly and Akhalkalaki to Georgia.[39] The most contested region was Nagorno-Karabakh, which was largely populated by Armenians. Despite its demographic composition, the Kavbiuro attached it to Azerbaijan in July 1921. The exact reasons for this decision remain unclear, but economic considerations may have tilted the scales in Azerbaijan's favor. Nagorno-Karabakh simply had better connections with Baku than with Erivan' (from 1936, Yerevan). The Armenian representatives tried in vain to reverse this decision.[40]


**Figure 20.** Political map of the South Caucasus region at the end of 1921.

Provisional solutions were found for all of these border settlements, but they were simply drafted without any knowledge of the border territories.[41] Moreover, at the beginning of March 1923, Aleksandr Beloborodov, at the time head of the Administrative Commission at VTsIK in Moscow, noted—with some degree of horror—that by the terms of these provisional agreements some regions belonged to two republics and some to none. He urged the ZakTsIK and ZakSovnarkom to resolve these territorial issues immediately, but that never happened.[42]

Before the First World War, the region that would later become the Armenian-Azerbaijani borderland had contained almost no ethnically mixed settlements save for the larger towns.[43] During the war, many villages were burned down, forcing the inhabitants to leave. As a result, after 1921 numerous villages were deserted. Neighboring villages began to compete for deserted fields and pastures. Acts of violence became commonplace, such as burning fields or stealing cattle, particularly if the owners were from another community.[44] Even though party and state authorities organized several conferences on border questions between 1921 and 1923, they were forced to realize that it was one thing to find a solution to a given problem at the table in Tiflis and quite another to implement that solution on the ground. They had to deal

with passive resistance and open hostility from regional administrators as well as local inhabitants.[45]

After Sovietization, ethnically charged or, to put it better, ethnically framed conflicts continued to cause problems for regional Bolshevik elites. The term "misunderstanding" (*nedorazumenie*) served in the Soviet bureaucracy as a euphemism for such unrest. Some of these misunderstandings degenerated into armed conflict between rival communities.[46] Federal actors had to step in, out of fear that local communist functionaries would side with "their" people. Thus commissions from Tiflis were to conduct missions to the disputed areas and look into the details of what was going on.[47] Local and regional experts, particularly field surveyors, did more than play key roles in the complex negotiations or provide expertise about issues that were important to officials in Tiflis. Locals could also perceive these lower-level experts as "neutral" mediators. Though the Transcaucasian administration enjoyed only limited funding, it nonetheless hired eight well-paid experts in the 1920s to collect data, arbitrate in border disputes, and survey pastures and the modes of their distribution.[48]

Federal commissions from Tiflis were the Bolshevik government's main tool for solving territorial conflicts on the ground. Politicians working together with surveyors would find workable settlements. The Territorial Commission of the ZakTsIK coordinated all such efforts and wielded enormous authority, at least in theory.[49] In contrast to territorial issues among republics of the USSR, where every republic involved had to consent to a border revision, the Territorial Commission of the ZSFSR had the authority, in principle, to resolve certain issues against the will of a member republic.[50] Several subcommissions were sent to border villages and pastures to acquaint themselves with the situation on site.[51]

Analysis of the conflicts and efforts to find solutions in the Armenian-Azerbaijani borderland reveal that federal institutions, the ZakTsIK in particular, usually did not favor one side or the other. Rather, they tried to find what they considered "efficient" (*tselesoobraznye*) solutions. Some parts of this border were easier to define than others. Particularly in the highland areas, boundaries were marked by mountain ridges.[52] The borders in the north and in the south were much more subject to dispute, as there was neither a single mountain range nor a river to provide a "natural" marker. This was where the unsettled borders that so bothered Beloborodov lay. In contrast to other regions of the Soviet state, the administrative borders of the imperial

period did not serve as standards for the new republican ones.[53] Apart from the raw decisions by the Kavbiuro in 1921, the borders delineating the three republics were in an *uti possidetis* state, meaning that an area belonged to the republic that controlled it.[54] This led to challenges on the ground when neighboring communities struggled over pastures and fields. According to early Soviet law, it was the state and its Narkomzem that distributed such lands to communities. Hence everyone saw the necessity for a territorial fine-tuning among the republics, but the making of such agreements turned out to be very complicated, as the following case studies illustrate.

In Shinikh Airum, a mountainous area northeast of Lake Sevan, sedentary Christian Armenian and seminomadic Muslim Turk communities clashed over the right to use certain pastures and fields. After Sovietization, the area became part of Soviet Armenia, but soon discussions were underway to attach it to Azerbaijan, especially since it was economically more closely connected with the Azerbaijani side and populated by Turkic Muslim herdsmen. Bashkend, an Armenian village, served as a local center in the area. About three thousand people lived there, and they had no desire to change their republican affiliation. To understand the stakes better, we have to go back to the complex system of land distribution among local communities that existed before 1917.

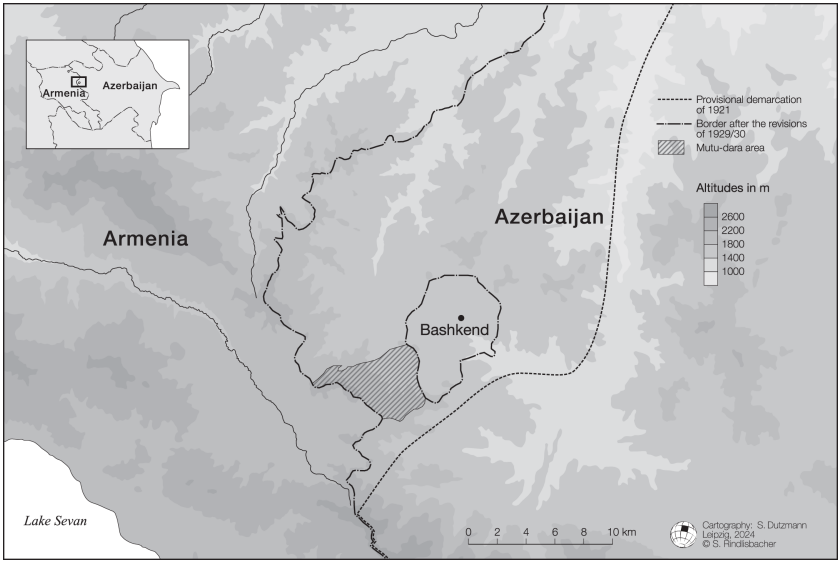


**Figure 21.** Delimitation of the republican borders in the region around Bashkend, 1930.

Under the old regime the peasants of Bashkend did not have enough land for subsistence. They would lease pastures and fields, mostly from local Muslim landowners (*bei* or *bek*). For instance, in 1901 four peasants from Bashkend leased 347 desiatinas (about 382 hectares) of arable land in an area called Mutu-dara from Asad-bek Sultanov. At a notary's office in Yelizavetpol', all of the parties signed a contract on an expensive sheet of paper that bore an official imperial stamp. Mutu-dara was a part of Sultanov's estate in the region. The contract was limited to nine years, but it could be extended by mutual agreement. Each year the peasants had to pay Sultanov three hundred rubles in advance. As both parties were satisfied with the deal, the contract was renewed twice.[55] The 347 desiatinas were too much land for the four peasants alone, so they sublet it to other peasants from Bashkend and herdsmen from neighboring Muslim communities. Among them was a man named Dzhafar Rassul-ogly and his family.[56] Dzhafar Rassul-ogly himself was the leader of a local group of herdsmen and had a criminal reputation going back to before the war. After the Sovietization of the South Caucasus, the fields in the region of Shinikh Airum remained a source of contention even though all private property in land had been abolished in theory.

In 1922 herdsmen under the leadership of Dzhafar Rassul-ogly took Mutu-dara from the Armenian peasants by force. Their argument was that Asad-bek Sultanov had been a Muslim and his land was now their land. The peasants from Bashkend argued that they had been working this land for over twenty years and it was theirs.[57] Then the herdsmen destroyed some of the peasants' agricultural tools. In return, people from Bashkend destroyed the herdsmen's winter huts (*zimoviki*). The Transcaucasian government dispatched an official commission under Yakubov, a high-ranking member of ZakTsIK's Territorial Commission, to the location. With the aid of three comrades and a surveyor named Sen'ko, Yakubov had to investigate the situation.[58]

The commission from Tiflis noted that arable land in the area was extremely scarce as there were many rocky areas ill-suited to any form of agriculture.[59] The surveyor Sen'ko also stressed the severity of the situation in Bashkend. The peasants had only 0.8 desiatinas (0.9 ha) of suitable land per head, whereas their Muslim neighbors had about 1.3 desiatinas (1.4 ha) per head at their disposal.[60] Sen'ko did not mention that herdsmen need more space to graze their cattle than sedentary peasants do to grow their crops.

Each side was able to state its claims before the commission. The Armenians pointed again to the fact that they had been leasing the land

from the bei. Thus they should keep it. In response, Dzhafar Rassul-ogly said that the four Armenian tenants had been subletting some of the land to the inhabitants of Bashkend as well as to Muslim herdsmen in the region. Even though everyone in the region knew of his dubious past, Dzhafar Rassul-ogly tried to give his previous life a positive spin in front of the commission. He highlighted the fact that, under the old regime, he had fought the local bei and had even served two years in prison. In the end, everyone signed statements presenting all of their claims, but the commission proved unable to make any decision.[61]

During the interaction between the officials and the locals, the ideological framework was obvious. *Kulak* (rich peasant) and *bei/bek* (Muslim lord) were key terms for describing an enemy of the party in rural areas, much like *burzhui* (bourgeois) in the urban context.[62] These terms as such were mostly void of meaning, but in a dispute over land use they were often used by one side to diminish the standing of the other.

In the years that followed, the ZakTsIK delayed any decision concerning the region of Shinikh Airum. People from the region therefore kept sending petitions for a change of republican affiliation.[63] Relations between Bashkend and its neighboring communities deteriorated further. In September 1925 the chairman of the rural soviet wrote a desperate letter to Tiflis:

> The people from Shinikh are harassing us. We can't any longer graze our cattle on the pastures. When we graze our cattle, they steal it. When we ask the chairman of the *uchastka* administration, he holds up the case for several days. During this time, they sell the stolen cattle.
>
> Such things happened between 1921 and 1925. I . . . have proof that from March to September 1925 fifty head of livestock were stolen: horses, oxen, and other horned cattle.[64]

In September 1925 armed skirmishes caused a panic among the inhabitants of Bashkend. They, too, sent a petition to Tiflis, begging the responsible organs to deport Dzhafar Rassul-ogly. He had threatened the people of Bashkend with a gun and had even injured one of them.[65]

Facing such alarming reports, a new commission was assigned the task of investigating and finding a solution for Shinikh Airum.[66] The utter failure of this commission was unique even by Transcaucasian standards, but the story reveals the wide array of challenges that typically confronted such commissions. Iosif Onanov, a secretary of the

ZakTsIK, was in charge. He was joined by Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives identified as Gritsenko and Ishkhanov respectively, as well as two surveyors, Sen'ko from Armenia, and Khaustov from Azerbaijan. The commission's goal was to find a workable solution for the disputed pastures and to submit a proposal for a revision of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in this area.

Working conditions in Shinikh Airum were challenging at best. Maps had gone missing and local boundary stones had been destroyed or tampered with.[67] After one week, the surveyor Khaustov and Chairman Onanov got into a serious disagreement. This was partly because it was not clear whether the surveyors were to have a decisive say in the commission's work. Onanov tried to exclude them. Khaustov would not accept such an alleged degradation. Then Onanov complained about Khaustov's slow pace of work. Khaustov responded that this was due to bad equipment. Up to this point, the quarrel was more or less professional, but then it became political. Onanov later reported: "Khaustov began to scream in front of a peasant crowd and Armenian as well as Azeri policemen. He told them quite clearly that our commission was an extraordinary troika, that it was one-sided. Its aim was to expel the Muslim population from their ancestral grounds and give these territories to the Armenians."[68] As Onanov intended to discredit Khaustov, it is not clear what "really" happened in the village and what was actually said. Nonetheless, his report hints that the peasants and herdsmen could be mobilized by this issue. They saw demarcation as a question of who would have access to certain resources in the future.

The disagreement between Onanov and Khaustov intensified, and the mission failed completely. Khaustov claimed that Onanov was incompetent, favored the Armenian side, and was planning to draw the borders without visiting the areas in question.[69] In return, Onanov accused Khaustov of speaking with the dubious Dzhafar Rassul-ogly in Turkish.[70] Not only could personal antagonisms produce such failure, but so could protests by locals fearing that a solution would harm their economic interests.

The Shinikh Airum issue remained unresolved and therefore kept troubling the locals as well as the federal administration. The mood on the ground was tense. Only one month later, in October 1925, the inhabitants of Bashkend reported seeing surveyors from Azerbaijan in the area. Among them, Abgar Kharatian, a thirty-three-year-old peasant, said he and five other people from the village encountered an

armed group of Azerbaijani officials accompanied by Dzhafar Rassul-ogly while collecting pears in a forest near the village:

> The forester Mamedov [from the Azerbaijani side] approached us and asked for whom we were harvesting the pears. I answered that he could prohibit the collection of pears in his forestry, but we are in Armenia here. Then he asked where the border was, and I answered that it was behind the mountain ridge of Sari-Bulag in Shnykh-su. The Azerbaijanis took half of the pears we had harvested, and we left the other half on the ground as we . . . left out of fear. I asked the former bandit Dzhafar Guly [Dzhafar Rassul-ogly] why these people were here, what they were doing. Dzhafar Guly answered that they were marking the new border as they had received a commission from the center. The fields and the forests were to be attached to Azerbaijan. . . . Then I asked why no Armenian representatives from our forestry were present. Dzhafar answered that the Azerbaijanis had informed the Armenian forester, but he did not show up. Thus the Azerbaijanis are now marking the new border by themselves. . . . The next day, they continued surveying, and I personally observed how they placed a marker [*kurgan*] in a part of the forest that we had leased from the Armenian forestry. . . . [71]

This quote reflects the full extent of the antagonism between Azerbaijani officials and Armenian residents. But it also shows that Abgar Kharatian was easily able to communicate with the representatives of the "others." For all the violence that had afflicted the region since the late nineteenth century, we should not forget that these communities had nonetheless been living together for a long time.

On learning of these events, Armenian officials protested loudly to Tiflis. The Territorial Commission under Sarkis Kas'ian condemned any kind of unilateral Azerbaijani activity on Armenian soil with a clarity rarely found in its minutes. It ordered an immediate stop. A special commission was tasked with investigating the incidents and calling those involved to account—in particular the head of the forestry in Azerbaijani Kazakh Province, Mamedov, and the "former bandit" Dzhafar Rassul-ogly—as their "activities were disturbing the good-neighborly relations between the two nationalities [*narodnosti*]."[72] At the same session, the Territorial Commission also discussed the failed Onanov Commission. It found the work of the surveyors Khaustov and Sen'ko satisfactory—contrary to Onanov's claims—and ordered

further investigations into the incidents. The outcome of the investigation into this matter did not end favorably for Onanov. The ZakTsIK fired him.[73]

The following year, disturbances in the area were again exacerbated when Azerbaijani policemen arrested Armenian surveyors during their work. The Armenian Narkomzem had commissioned two surveyors, Kovalev and Troitskii, to inspect the region of Shinikh Airum. With them was a young assistant named Matevasian. On 20 October 1926 people from the Azerbaijani village of Gachiliar took notice of them and informed the local police. The policemen detained the three men and sent them to Tauz.[74] One week later, the authorities in Erivan' learned that their surveyors were in an Azerbaijani prison. An appeal was sent to Tiflis, urging intervention on the part of the ZakTsIK and demanding the immediate release of the three men. The ZakTsIK promptly asked the AzTsIK to resolve the matter.[75] After a week AzTsIK Secretary Kiazimov replied that the three had in fact been arrested, because the ZakTsIK had prohibited surveying in Shinikh Airum. He also added that the Azerbaijani police had released them after interrogation. In his reply, Kiazimov explicitly warned that the Armenian authorities should take care not to send any more surveyors to this territory without the consent of the ZakTsIK.[76] The affair was ultimately settled, but the surveyors' arrest and their delayed release were symptomatic of both the poor relations that persisted between the two republics and the federal institutions' lack of authority. It was only one of many obstructions during territorialization.

Despite resistance from regional officials on the ground, the federal administration continued to make efforts to resolve the Shinikh Airum issue. On 11 January 1927 the commissars for agriculture from Armenia and Azerbaijan, Aramais Yerzinkian and Dadash Buniat-Zade, respectively, joined the Territorial Commission in Tiflis. Invested with the authority of their offices, they were expected to settle the matter of Shinikh Airum once and for all. Initially, it looked as if they could reach an agreement. The area would form a part of Azerbaijan, and the village of Bashkend would remain a part of Armenia. To maintain a territorial link to Armenia, the village was to receive a small strip of land, the aforementioned area of Mutu-dara. But suddenly the talks soured. Yerzinkian, the Armenian commissar, had agreed to this transfer, as he was expecting something in return. The Azerbaijani summer pastures of Alagelliar, south of Lake Sevan, approximated an Azerbaijani enclave within Armenian territory. To rectify this border, Yerzinkian wanted

Alagelliar to be transferred to Armenia. On hearing this, his Azerbaijani counterpart, Buniat-Zade, informed his comrades that he had no mandate to negotiate over Alagelliar. Yerzinkian then withdrew his consent to the transfer of Shinikh Airum.[77] The ZakTsIK ordered them to find a solution within two weeks, but in fact, nothing happened at all.[78] The federal center again proved unable to assert its formal authority.

Only in February 1929, roughly eight years after the Sovietization of the South Caucasus, did the ZakTsIK manage to conclude and ratify a border agreement among all three republics. As this was a compromise among all of the parties concerned, no one was satisfied. With respect to Shinikh Airum, it was expected to be transferred to Azerbaijan, but the ZakTsIK stated explicitly that Bashkend, as a larger Armenian settlement, would remain part of the Armenian Republic. As had been discussed in 1927, Mutu-dara was expected to connect the village with the rest of Armenia.[79]

In response, the herdsmen of Shinikh Airum sent urgent petitions and telegrams to Tiflis and even to TsIK Chairman Mikhail Kalinin in Moscow.[80] They complained of economic hardship and a lack of land vis-à-vis the inhabitants of Bashkend in the "Ararat Republic": "How have we wronged Soviet power? For one peasant, Soviet power is like a mother, for another like a stepmother. In recent months, they have taken our houses and our buildings on the fields of Mutu-dara . . . Bala, Cha-chikh, Katiuklu, Khanumtala, and others. They took them from the map of Azerbaijan and put them on the map of Armenia."[81]

Politicians in Moscow had no intention of getting involved in South Caucasian problems and sent the petitions back to Tiflis. The comrades there had to take care of the matter. The ZakTsIK now launched another investigation—and the surveyor Chkhenkeli again explained to his superiors that Mutu-dara was the strip of land expected to connect Bashkend with Armenia and that this strip of land was claimed by Dzhafar Rassul-ogly and his herdsmen as well as by the peasants of Bashkend.[82] In the end, the ZakTsIK ordered a redistribution of the land to the advantage of the Muslim herdsmen and attached the area of Mutu-dara de jure to Azerbaijan. With that, Bashkend and the surrounding territory became an Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan.[83]

Under Soviet rule, the existence of such an enclave did not pose any great challenge. The territorial division more or less reflected land use in the area. In 1978 Bashkend was even renamed Artsvashen to make it sound more Armenian. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, Armenia and Azerbaijan plunged into war as a result of the

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijani troops occupied Artsvashen and expelled its inhabitants in 1992. Most of the houses there were destroyed, and the area was abandoned.

The border area in the south between the regions of Megri and Kariagino (today Füzuli), right at the border with Persia, faced many of the same complex challenges as Shinikh Airum. In the mid-1920s several commissions were tasked with resolving border issues that had emerged there. In 1924 senior representatives from Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the persons of Aramais Yerzinkian and Mir Dzhafar Bagirov, met in Tiflis to search for a settlement acceptable to both sides. Surprisingly, they found a compromise and drew a new border on a map. However, as soon as the surveyors arrived on site to stake out the changes, they had to report back to Tiflis that the border established at the negotiating table was not feasible in practice.[84] The whole issue had to be reconsidered.

In 1925 territorial affiliations in the southern border region were vague at best. The south shared some characteristics with the north. Here, too, Armenian villages had previously leased land from a bei. However, there were also other factors at stake. Geologists had discovered copper ore in the Armenian-Azerbaijani border area near Megri. This suggested a potential for establishing a local mining industry.

In this regard, Azerbaijan's Niuvadi rural soviet was of particular interest. This rural soviet consisted of Niuvadi itself and its two small neighboring villages Einazur and Tugut. The rural soviet was rather small, with a population of about 650 Turkish-speaking people, but these people were vehemently opposed to joining Armenia.[85] In a petition to the ZakTsIK in October 1925, they stressed that their agricultural economies were closely linked to Azerbaijan, and they were afraid being marginalized under Armenian rule: "All the institutions in [Azerbaijani] Kariagino Uezd operate in our native language, but in [Armenian] Megri Uezd in Armenian. Most officials in Megri Uezd do not speak the Tatar language [i.e., Turkish] at all, and if we want to contact them, we have to find a translator."[86]

The Niuvadi representatives argued for using national and economic factors, completely in line with the official Soviet discourse of the day, but the Armenian authorities in Megri apparently found more convincing arguments to include this rural soviet in their uezd. First, the latter highlighted that the recently discovered copper ore could lead to a future mining industry. Local herdsmen and peasants would be able to find work in this new industry. This was something that would

advance the region as a whole.[87] Then they stressed that Niuvadi was just 20 versta (21 kilometers) from Megri in Armenia, but 150 versta (160 kilometers) from Kariagino in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, they insisted that the local state institutions in Megri were fully able to function in the "Muslim language" as well as Armenian. They then went on to voice their suspicions that ulterior motivations were at play in the three villages. According to the Armenian representatives, some people in Niuvadi profited from living at such a remove from Kariagino. The distance allowed them to misappropriate state funds, graze cattle without paying pasture fees, and cut wood without a license: "this stratum of kulaks and wealthy peasants opposes a transfer of their villages to Megri Uezd. The poorest peasants remain under the economic and ideological influence of the kulaks and the former beks."[88]

In addition, the Armenian side also seems to have stooped to forging petitions from Niuvadi to further its cause. In the months that followed, two letters reached Tiflis. The first was written in Armenian but signed with names in Arabic-Turkic script. Both pretended to represent the impoverished peasants of Niuvadi, ostensibly oppressed by wealthy kulaks. Inclusion in Megri Uezd would present new opportunities for them culturally and economically. Experts in Tiflis assessed the petitions as forgeries and ignored them.[89]

The dispute over Niuvadi continued to create problems even at the highest levels of the state and party administration. In the summer of 1927 a new commission under the commissars of agriculture from Armenia and Azerbaijan, Yerzinkian and Buniat-Zade, as well as Georgii Sturua (from the Georgian TsKK), was tasked with finding a solution. It failed, because its representatives could not even manage to travel to the site in question. That November, Buniat-Zade openly rejected the transfer of the Niuvadi rural soviet to Armenia.[90]

Overriding Azerbaijani objections, the ZakTsIK did go ahead and attach the Niuvadi rural soviet to Armenia as part of a larger package of revisions to the border in February 1929.[91] This was, of course, not in response to the Armenians' anti-kulak propaganda but was done in the interest of local economic development. Copper mining was to bring industry to the region, and the locals would be able to find employment there.[92] Thus, as in other parts of the Soviet Union, economic arguments involving something like a prospective copper mine could easily outstrip national arguments on a small, local level. Even though the vision of a mining company in Niuvadi was never realized, the area remains a part of Armenia to this day. Thus the ZakTsIK defined the

republics' territory in terms of not only the status quo but also future development. However, these decisions were not bound by a condition that the envisioned development would ever be realized.

In the summer of 1926 surveyors from Tiflis set out to define the boundary between the villages of Sevakiar (today Sevakar, Armenia) and Zor (Azerbaijan) south to the town of Geriusy (today Goris). In this case, representatives of the two villages were unable to agree on who in fact owned the fields separating them. This encompassed an area of seventeen desiatinas, or about sixteen hectares. The representatives of Zor accused their Armenian neighbors of occupying certain fields during the First World War and holding on to them ever since. The representatives of Sevakiar countered that their people had built an orchard on the land, which they had leased from a bei thirty years before. The bei then suddenly took it back for his own use, and now one of his heirs was cultivating a part of it.[93] Thus a surveyor named Rukhiladze, a deputy from the Territorial Commission, decided to attach the orchard to Armenia but to grant its former owner in Zor the right to use parts of it.[94]

Living in one Soviet republic and farming land in a neighboring Soviet republic was not easy. Firid Memed Ali-ogly, the "owner" of the orchard in question, was soon complaining that Armenian officials were preventing him from harvesting his fruit. Moreover, he insisted that he had planted seventy-two of the trees in question himself.[95] The Territorial Commission again intervened and ordered the local Armenian administration in Zangezur to respect Firid Memed Ali-ogly's right to use the orchard.[96] Generously put, the reaction from the authorities in Zangezur was a display of peasant cunning at best. They denied any ill will and stressed that Firid Memed Ali-ogly was in fact allowed to use the orchard. But, they added, in the wake of a redistribution of land in the interim "a few pear trees" had ended up in the possession of the peasants from the village of Zeiv. As a result, they continued, there were now two orchards, and the Territorial Commission's ruling left only the latter one for Firid's use.[97]

Firid Memed Ali-ogly's orchard again demonstrates the general weakness of the federal government in Tiflis to enact its decisions. The Zangezur authorities continued to play games, thus denying Firid Memed Ali-ogly access to the trees until 1930. The secretary of the ZakTsIK in Tiflis was furious with the Armenian authorities, not only for refusing to enforce the legal framework but for justifying their actions on such dubious grounds.[98] In the spring of 1930 representatives of the Armenian and the Azerbaijani sides set up a new commission and visited the

fields. There they once again recognized Firid Memed Ali-ogly's claims and reaffirmed his right to the orchard on Armenian territory. In the end, the whole issue was much ado about nothing, but Firid's orchard had created problems for the federal administration for more than four years. Worst of all, the size of the orchard added up to nothing more than a single hectare.[99]

The large-scale territorial revision enacted on 18 February 1929 aimed at resolving such territorial disputes, but it soon turned out to be unsatisfactory. Federal surveyors still encountered numerous difficulties in their daily work. The borders of all three republics in the ZSFSR totaled 1,800 kilometers. Yet at the end of 1930 eight hundred kilometers had yet to be surveyed or mapped. In a report to the chairman of the ZakTsIK, the surveyors Chkhenkeli and Yeganov explained that they had met with resistance from village representatives and peasants as well as republican officials. Nonetheless, they tried to do their jobs as best they could.[100] Around 1928–1929, federal support for the surveyors began to wane. The Territorial Commission was facing budget cuts and had to fire most of its employees, including its experts. By 1931 Yeganov and Chkhenkeli were the only federal employees still working on territorial issues.[101] State funds were flowing elsewhere, leaving large stretches of the borders separating the South Caucasian


**Figure 22.** Political map of the South Caucasus at the end of 1936.

republics inadequately surveyed. Although the surveyors marked some borders by erecting signs, many segments lacked signs as well. The federal commissions and their surveyors had managed to solve some issues between border communities, but plenty of others were left unsettled. The ZakTsIK had invested a great deal of time and effort in resolving territorial disputes during the 1920s, but the results could not meet expectations. When the ZSFSR was dissolved in 1936, the territories of the republics it had overseen were confirmed to a large extent, but many details remained unsolved. Even in the 1980s, maps of the Soviet military often depicted areas where the border between the Armenian and Azerbaijan SSR was not defined.[102]

## A Fixed Border and a Mobile Population

Borders between Soviet republics are often considered a purely administrative matter that has little impact on daily life for the population.[103] This might be true for some parts of the population, indeed for the greater part, but for people who lived near such borders, like Firid Memed Ali-ogly, demarcation could have a very negative impact on their way of life, day in and day out.[104] The same situation affected people who led a nonsedentary way of life. As in Central Asia, nonsedentary forms of cattle breeding were an important part of the rural economy in the South Caucasus.[105] Every year, herdsmen—nomads (*kochevniki*), as they were officially called—along with their flocks and herds, roamed from winter pastures in the flatlands of the east to summer pastures in the highlands of the west and north. Officials even distinguished between "full" nomads (*kochevniki*), who moved between summer and winter pastures without a fixed place of residence, and seminomads (*polukochevniki*), who moved between their place of residence and summer pastures.[106]

During the nineteenth century relative peace under Russian imperial rule led to an increased number of herders and their livestock. This subsequently provoked conflicts over pastureland with the sedentary population. Constant competition over scarce resources among different communities was one factor that caused violent clashes to spread out from the urban to the rural areas during the troubles of 1905. This remained an important factor in the nationalized conflicts after the collapse of Russian imperial rule after 1917.[107]

In the mid-1920s the share of nomads was quite small, only about sixty thousand in a region with a population of about six million.[108]

Half of them were Muslim Turks wandering between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[109] Moreover, the Soviet administration considered around a third of the population in Azerbaijan—about 800,000 people—to be seminomads.[110] Traditionally, these Muslim households migrated from their villages in the summer: for example, from Azerbaijan's Kazakh Uezd to Armenia's Dilizhan Uezd, where Bashkend was located. Conflicts with the local sedentary population were simply an everyday occurrence, but so were other forms of social interaction such as trade.

Tsarist officials had not interfered much in the rural economy, aside from levying taxes and making sporadic attempts to propagate Orthodox Christianity. Nonetheless, the tsarist state had already devised a system of classification for the local population. This system saw Christians (such as the Georgians and Armenians) as civilized and progressive, while non-Christians were viewed as uncivilized and backward.[111] The nonsedentary Muslim population found itself at the bottom of this ethnographic hierarchy. The Bolsheviks and Soviet ethnographers later adopted this model in a much more rigid way, but without the religious normativity. Due to their long-standing cultural and political traditions, the Georgians and Armenians (unlike the Azerbaijani Turks) counted as advanced nations—much like Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, or Germans.[112] Nomads presented an obstacle to the state-sponsored project of an all-encompassing normalization of space and society—that is, the use of rational criteria to impose a new order on society and its understanding of economics, nationality, culture, and gender.[113] Yet at the outset, the Bolsheviks perceived the "backward" part of the population as a potential ally of the proletariat and thus worthy of the party's full political support.

The "pasture issue" (*pastbishchnyi vopros*) was the term that Soviet administrators applied to land-related disputes between sedentary Armenian peasants and nonsedentary Muslim herdsmen. Such disputes were linked to the general issue of territory, absorbed a great deal of federal resources, and continued to exacerbate relations between the Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities. In 1924 and 1925 nomads and seminomads from Azerbaijan used about four hundred square kilometers of summer pastures in Armenia.[114] Even though the federal administration tried in earnest to settle conflicts among different interest groups, the sheer number of conflicts and their complexity left functionaries in Tiflis overwhelmed. However, sedentary and nonsedentary parts of the population also shared a long tradition of coexistence. Peasants and nomads traded daily in commodities such as cheese or corn. As

mentioned above, peasants and herdsmen used to lease pastures to and from one other.[115] But these practices fundamentally challenged the Soviet state's claim to regulating land distribution. During the NEP Soviet functionaries tolerated these traditions, but at the end of the 1920s they began to intervene more and more.[116] They criminalized not only trading but other traditional forms of interaction between sedentary peasants and nomads as well.

Throughout the 1920s the pasture issue continued to create problems for the Soviet administration.[117] With the support of the Zakkraikom and the ZakTsIK, peasants and nomads could use the nationalized fields and forests that they had been using since before the war. Starting in 1923, they had to pay a certain agricultural tax, but so did all of the other regions of the Soviet state.[118] However, this situation was untenable, because in the early years of the ZSFSR, agriculture was the domain of the republics.[119] The Armenian and the Azerbaijani Commissariat for Agriculture wrangled over a form of pasture distribution that was advantageous to their side, but the federal authorities could only arbitrate. Only in 1929 was a Transcaucasian Commissariat for Agriculture established, but its main purpose was to coordinate and promote collectivization. Meanwhile, the political power of federal institutions declined even more, while republican institutions gained in influence.[120]

On the ground, relations between the Muslim nomads and the sedentary Armenian peasants remained poor. Ottoman atrocities in Anatolia during the First World War and the constant influx of Armenian refugees exacerbated existing conflicts. The Communist Party was forced to intervene. In November 1922 the Zakkraikom introduced a party directive in favor of the herdsmen, stating that the latter should be allowed to use the pastures in Armenia, and that the Azerbaijani People's Commissariat for Agriculture, not the Armenian one, should take care of them.[121] With this step, the federal authorities attempted to institutionalize procedures for settling such cross-border matters, but they discovered that they simultaneously had to deal with the resistance of the authorities in both republics.

Seasonal migration from one pasture to another created numerous opportunities for conflict. For example, the nomadic way of life contributed to the rapid spread of a cattle plague that afflicted the region. During migration, the federal government in Tiflis had tried to enact measures against the plague, but they failed to contain it fully.[122] Another source of conflict was the fact that during migration the nomads

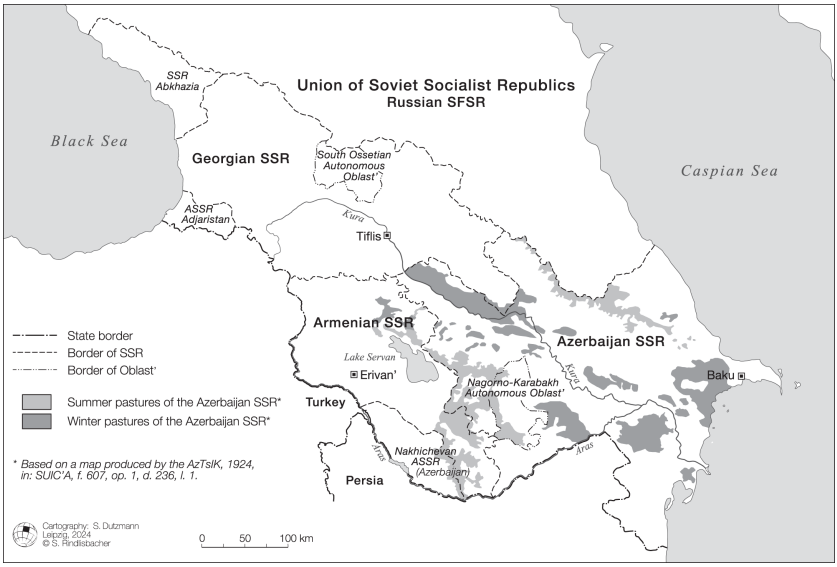


**Figure 23.** Adapted map of the winter and summer pastures of the Azerbaijan SSR, 1 June 1924.

also had to graze their flocks. Although the ZakTsIK introduced rules to govern changes of pasture, this did not improve the situation. Complaints poured in. Herdsmen did not always take the roads the administration provided them, and on their way, they continued to let their cattle graze on fields that belonged to nearby Armenian villages.[123]

Disputes related to summer pastures simply would not abate. Even when the people's commissariats for agriculture offered an alternative pasture, the nomads often did not much care for it. They kept using their "ancestral grounds."[124] Though the federal and republican authorities refused to recognize such arguments de jure, they had to de facto—especially since the party line favored the nomads. Of course, this then also led to conflicts with those who had just acquired the formal right to use these pastures from the same state authorities. In such cases, surveyors and emissaries from Tiflis were called in to arbitrate over and over again.[125]

Once the vision of world revolution receded, the Bolshevik leadership decided to accelerate the development of the Soviet economy to build the material basis for a future socialist society in one country. The pursuit of this grand undertaking for a better future ran up against a nomadic population bound to past practices. But this does not mean

that the Communist Party simply ignored "backward" practices in its march toward progress. It took a long-term perspective. In 1924 the ZakTsIK officially proclaimed that nomadism was historically doomed: "the goal is to gradually change from nomadic and seminomadic cattle breeding to developed agriculture [*kul'turnoe zemledelie*] in the winter pastures and to an alpine form of economy in the summer pastures. [This goal is to be achieved] with the maximal assistance of the people in the transition to new forms of agriculture."[126]

However, the ZakTsIK was careful to couch its vision in acceptable language. The establishment of new agricultural forms was a project for a more distant future. Most functionaries within the state bureaucracy and the party apparatus understood this proclamation as Dadash Buniat-Zade, Azerbaijan's commissar for agriculture, had. He emphasized that this change would affect about a third of the Azerbaijani population, because most winter pastures were not arable in the summer due to heat and aridity. Many improvements (e.g., irrigation or campaigns against malaria) still had to be carried out.[127]

Party activists sought to agitate and mobilize the nomads and seminomads because they saw the *bedniaki* (poor peasants), *seredniaki* (middle peasants), and *batraki* (landless people) as possible allies of the proletariat.[128] By sending propagandists and activists to the pastures, they tried but ultimately failed to make inroads among this part of the population. Shota Palavandishvili, one of the party propagandists, expressed his deep disappointment in May 1928: "From a political perspective, the nomads as such are completely undeveloped and appear as an impenetrable mass. Most of them are illiterate. In personal conversations, I have assured myself that they are not interested in anything or anyone beyond their own affairs."[129]

At the end of the 1920s this kind of political indifference was seen as a direct threat to the party and its goal of modernizing the economy and society by means of the first five-year plan. The nomads seemed to provide an ideal social stratum onto which the communists could project their nightmares. Therefore, it is not surprising that Palavandishvili, after reporting these expressions of political indifference, openly attacked the nomads, as a "*kulak-dashnak* element."[130] Although the mostly Muslim, Turkish-speaking nomads were far from being kulaks or harboring sympathy for Armenian nationalists, accusations of this nature would soon prove very dangerous.

The Cultural Revolution crushed the idea of Soviet modernization evolving over the long term. Social and economic change had to be

realized now and at any price. In the course of the first five-year plan, agriculture was supposed to deliver surpluses for export that would bring in revenue to finance industrialization. The party forced the peasants and nomads throughout the union to join the kolkhozes and sovkhozes in order to control their production and extract as many resources as possible.[131] The party was no longer willing to wait for the people to modernize the economy. They had to be pushed. In the South Caucasus this was the tipping point that allowed nationalist and social arguments against nomadism to descend into political violence. Nomads and seminomads quickly evolved from obstacles to enemies. Party activists such as Buniat-Zade, who had previously opposed plans for any kind of sweeping sedentarization, found themselves forced to stick to the shifting rules of the party game.[132]

In early 1930 anti-kulak repression reached an initial climax.[133] It proved to be a disastrous year for the nomadic economies, in the ZSFSR and throughout the union. Party activists now saw the nomads solely as under kulak domination and branded them as outlaws. In February the Azerbaijani branch of the secret police (OGPU) initiated a massive campaign against these kulaks. They arrested and deported more than a thousand people together with their families. After this wave of open repression, party activists once again "encouraged" the remaining *bedniaki* and *seredniaki* to join the collective farms.[134] At the same time, clashes between migrating nomads and newly formed Armenian collective farms broke out. Soviet Armenia had claimed the summer pastures for Armenian collective farms. But the Azerbaijani authorities and the nomads did not respect such unilateral decisions. This, together with a rejection of collectivization, led to upheaval in the rural areas. In the spring of 1930 the collectivization campaign brought some regions of the Soviet Union to the brink of civil war. In the villages of the South Caucasus, numerous communist propagandists were murdered. The regime's response was brutal.[135] It was at this point that Stalin intervened to slow the collectivization campaign. The situation seemed perilously close to slipping beyond the party's control. Some party activists, he warned, were "dizzy with success."[136]

In the South Caucasus this change of tone in Moscow toward collectivization had no immediate positive effect on the nomads and peasants. On the contrary, the anti-nomad policy even intensified under the pretext of collectivization. In 1931 the ZakTsIK tripled the tax on use of summer and winter pastures for people who had yet to join a collective farm. The goal was, of course, to coerce them to do exactly

that.[137] As the republican administrations still controlled land distribution, the newly established Armenian collective farms insisted on their claims to all of the summer pastures in Armenia, and in 1930 and 1931 the Armenian government decisively threw their support behind such initiatives.[138] The Azerbaijani government in turn tried to mobilize the ZakTsIK to protect "their" nomads. In the end, the ZakTsIK allowed the nomads to use the summer pastures in Armenia "for one last time" in 1932.[139] Despite such concessions, the Zakkraikom had already resolved to liquidate nomadism as such.[140] Unlike the barely literate nomads and seminomads, Armenian activists had used state and party institutions to gain control over Armenia's summer pastures. At this time, the already weak federal institutions, such as the ZakTsIK, that could articulate a common Transcaucasian policy and address competing interests began to fade from view.[141] Hence, with the support of the Zakkraikom, Armenian representatives were able to force the Transcaucasian Commissariat for Agriculture to sharply reduce the nomads' access to summer pastures in favor of Armenian collectives.[142]

As in other parts of the union, forced collectivization proved a disaster for cattle breeding. Nomads and seminomads preferred to slaughter or sell their cattle or flocks before joining a kolkhoz or sovkhoz.[143] When some of them did enter a collective with their cattle and flocks, officials and activists on site faced other kinds of severe challenges. They were unable to provide enough fodder, stables, or veterinary treatment despite the diminished numbers of animals arriving.[144] Managing collectivized pastures presented another problem for collective farms, as many of them went unused amid the administrative chaos.[145] In the Azerbaijani regions of Kazakh and Tauz, the party and state authorities restructured the entire rural economy from the ground up. The nomads and seminomads were expected to work on newly established cotton farms and provide Soviet industry with cheap resources.[146] Yet there was also a huge problem with housing, as the state could barely manage to provide construction materials.[147]

Compared to Central Asia, however, the number of casualties among the nomads and seminomads was much lower in the South Caucasus. It appears to be just as complex to analyze why people died as it is to understand how they survived.[148] In 1934 famines broke out in the Armenian-Azerbaijani borderlands. According to reports from the Zakkraikom, several hundred people—but not thousands or millions—died.[149] There were at least three specifically regional factors that played a role in keeping the number of victims comparatively low. First, people

had a means of escaping. In the Armenian-Azerbaijani border region, more than twelve thousand rural households were abandoned between 1930 and 1934.[150] Unlike in Kazakhstan, the borders between republics were not sealed off to refugees.[151] Herdsmen and peasants were thus able to flee the appalling conditions in the countryside for boom towns such as Baku or Erivan'.[152] Turkish-speaking people even tried to cross into Turkey.[153] Second, the share of "full" nomads was comparably low. In stark contrast to the nomads of Kazakhstan or the resettlement campaigns in Tajikistan, the seminomads of the South Caucasus could better manage forced settlement, as they were already familiar with the regional climate and sedentary economy.[154] Finally, unlike the situation in Ukraine, the Kuban, or Kazakhstan, there was no rigid confiscation policy in the South Caucasus. From Moscow's perspective, the region was already fulfilling its primary economic purpose as a supplier of oil and gas.[155] Advancing the rural economy and boosting cotton production were secondary, and the absolute and relative numbers of nomads and seminomads seemed insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Stalin's warning that some comrades were "dizzy with success" corresponded roughly with the rise of Lavrentii Beriia as the dominant figure in the ZSFSR. Already first secretary of the Georgian party since 1931, Beriia would serve simultaneously as head of the Zakkraikom from 1932 to 1937. He hewed closely to Stalin's new line of decelerating collectivization and was quick to see to its enforcement throughout the region. In a report to Stalin in November 1934, Beriia stressed that collectivization in Transcaucasia would take longer due to factors such as climate and geography. Although himself a reckless careerist, Beriia blamed predecessors, such as Buniat-Zade and Yerzinkian, for introducing destructive measures during collectivization and producing catastrophic results: "Mistakes committed in 1930–1931 led to a deterioration of the political situation in the village. Kulaks and anti-Soviet elements exploited this, and in the end, all of the Transcaucasian republics were forced to face a sharp decline in cultivated fields and a selling-off of cattle in the private sector."[156]

It is hardly surprising that Buniat-Zade and Yerzinkian fell victim to the Great Terror in the South Caucasus three years later. For Beriia collectivization was a long-term goal. Consequently, he resorted to positions shared by his predecessors in the 1920s. Within the framework of what appeared to be a more tolerant policy, people from Azerbaijan were able to lease summer pastures in Armenia again, but they had to follow specific bureaucratic procedures. As a result, the number of

seminomads and especially nomads declined significantly.[157] Nonetheless, seasonal movement of cattle led to repeated clashes in the border area that contributed to the mutual distrust between Armenian and Azerbaijani communities.[158]

Throughout the rest of the Soviet era, nomadic forms of life and agriculture endured, but it was only a marginal part of the rural economy in the South Caucasus. The party and state deliberately neglected nomadic life, which they still considered archaic and fated to slip into oblivion, but they did not take any more repressive actions against it.[159] The number of uncontrolled border crossings and interregional contacts beyond the official realm of economic activity dropped considerably. Even though forced Soviet modernization had not led to the deaths of millions as in Ukraine or Central Asia, it nevertheless had a fatal impact on South Caucasian societies, making them increasingly homogeneous in spatial terms.

## The Failure to Find a Mutually Accepted Border

In the South Caucasus, functionaries and experts made numerous attempts to determine and implement a common border regime for the three Soviet republics, but they ultimately failed to establish a coherent territorial order.[160] Due to a lack of support and the eagerness of republican elites to have a direct line to Moscow, the ZSFSR was dissolved in 1936.[161] Many pending border issues had yet to be resolved, and the republican governments kept trying to revise the territorial configuration.[162] In comparison with the Russian-Ukrainian border and the Fergana Valley, the party and state leadership in Moscow and the Zakkraikom in Tiflis shied away from any detailed decision making. Fearing to alienate one community while promoting another, the party leadership deliberately refrained from solving these territorial disputes by command. In contrast to the Ukrainian and Central Asian cases where authoritative commissions under Cherviakov and Zelenskii were installed, lower-ranking Transcaucasian communists had to micromanage these issues on their own, without any kind of brief from the party. Even though a lot of effort and resources were dedicated to these territorial issues, no comprehensive resolution could be found, as every side could obstruct the process as much as the game allowed. Thus large parts of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan lingered in a permanent state of limbo without resolution.[163]

National dichotomies among the population were much more crystallized in the South Caucasus than in the previously discussed cases. Ideas from the raionirovanie debate that aimed to overcome territorialization based on a national-ethnographic frame fell on particularly deaf ears here. There was no resistance worth mentioning within the party and state apparatus against the formation of Soviet nation-states. For many it appeared to be the only possible path for the region.

Despite their differences of opinion and occasional clashes, sedentary and nonsedentary communities were used to daily interaction in trading activity or leasing land. First, the party promoted the "backward" nonsedentary herdsmen (Turks) and protected them from claims made by the more "developed" sedentary population (Armenians). But during collectivization, the herdsman became an "enemy of the people." When the party criminalized certain traditional economic activities, the Armenian authorities used the momentum to expel the Turkish Muslim nomads from "their" summer pastures.