

## 1903–1917: Administrative Divisions before the Collapse of the Empire

The growth of social conflict and the first ethnic blood-letting in Transcaucasia (called then an Armenian-Tatar [Azerbaijani] massacre) in early 1905 prompted Nicholas II to restore the institution of the viceroyalty, under which were placed all the territories of Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus except Stavropol Province (Stavropolskaya Gubernia). The administration of the viceroy (Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov), helped by a flexible nationalities policy coupled with harsh police measures against the widely spread disturbances (martial law was introduced in many territories of the region, including Baku, Tiflis, Erivan, and Elisabethpol Provinces), managed to achieve a relative stabilization. In particular, the restoration of the Armenian Apostolic Church's property rights and the granting of permission for the church to open schools temporarily appeased the Armenian radicals. In Terek Province the Abramov Commission was created to study the state of land use and land ownership and devise measures to alleviate the land shortage. One of its goals was the reduction of conflict over land between Cossacks and mountain populations, and among various highland communities as well as among the privileged landowning class and landless peasants within these communities. Nevertheless, the growing polarization of political forces in the country and the region in 1905–1907 did not permit the ever-growing number of social and ethnic problems to be resolved.

Administrative changes during this period were local in nature and did not affect the overall structure of the region, which remained divided into civilian and military provinces—gubernias and oblasts, respectively. Areas with predominantly Cossack populations in Don Host, Kuban, and Terek Provinces were under direct Cossack military administration. Terek Province was divided into districts populated by Cossacks (otdels) and districts with predominantly highlander populations (okrugs). Daghestan, Kars, and the reconstituted (in 1903) Batum Province (Batumskaya Oblast) and Sukhum and Zakataly Districts were also under military administration. Vorontsov-Dashkov was

skeptical of the need to preserve this distinction. In practical terms, the oblasts increasingly resembled ordinary provinces. But a number of factors affecting these administrative distinctions, both social and political, prevented reform from being realized.

The development of the wheat industry in Kuban and Terek Provinces was significantly impeded by the Host system of communal land ownership. The Hosts' military, political, and social status largely depended on this ownership arrangement, however, and the possibility that it might be abolished was seen as a threat to the Hosts themselves. Changing the system risked, among other things, creating social stratification among the Cossacks, as well as the possible transfer of land to non-Cossacks. Within the context of the overall crisis in Russian colonization of Transcaucasia such prospects did not appeal to the imperial authorities, even though the proportion of ethnic Russians among the non-Cossack population in Kuban and Terek Provinces made this group the most likely beneficiary of the economic opportunities presented by these changes. Overall, the slow pace of land reform in the North Caucasus was tied to the high level of ethnosocial conflict there. And while for non-Cossack Russians social reforms were largely associated with the abolition of Cossack privileges, for mountain populations they meant the elimination of inequalities in land distribution. Furthermore, by 1917 highlander political circles were beginning to think that this inequality could be eliminated only by relocating a number of Terek Host villages to the northern side of the Terek. Solving the land problem—first and foremost the problem of agrarian overpopulation in the highlands—was therefore closely tied to changes in ethnic boundaries.

In terms of its ethnic composition, Transcaucasia was no less complex a region than the North Caucasus. As it was more economically developed, Transcaucasia also presented the imperial authorities with a more “problematic” political landscape: there were three national entities forming there, represented by the organizationally and programmatically advanced socialist-

leaning Georgian and Armenian parties and the more conservative Muslim groups. The increasing politicization and radicalization of ethnic elites that was prompted by imperial policy in the 1890s could no longer be neutralized. The cluster of social and national conflicts in Transcaucasia centered around the desire to attain regional self-rule as well as the competition for ethnic representation in municipal councils in the main economic centers.

None of the influential ethnically based political parties (to say nothing of regional or ethnic factions of “All-Russian” parties centered outside the Caucasus) proclaimed the goal of secession. Instead they developed programs for territorial autonomy within the Russian state that were couched in terms of “social liberation,” which meant different things for different social groups: for workers, the “emancipation of labor”; for ethnic elites, more representation in local government; for the peasantry, more equitable access to land and an end to land-redemption payments stemming from the reforms of past decades. However, internal conflict between the three nationalizing elites inevitably placed the ethnic composition of regional self-governing entities on the agenda—raising, in other words, the prospect that the region would be administratively divided into separate ethnic components. The compositional differences between Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus were manifested, in particular, in the fact that the test for “taking national boundaries sufficiently into account” in the hypothetical case of redrawing administrative borders was even more problematic here. While it was more or less possible to trace the boundaries of Georgia (although they had long since ceased to coincide with the nation's “historic” borders), and while it was still possible to identify individual districts where the population was numerically dominated by either Turkic or Armenian populations, in many cases, instead of ethnic boundaries, Transcaucasia contained entire districts and zones dotted with interspersed mono-ethnic enclaves and multi-ethnic urban centers.

Although any boundary settlements involved in the