

1917–1919: The Gorskaya Republic, a Failed Attempt at Independence

As the Civil War unfolded, the founding of another country was proclaimed in the North Caucasus: the Republic of Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus, also called the Gorskaya or Mountain Republic and the Republic of the Union of Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus and Daghestan. These different names to some extent reflect different stages in its history, but for the most part they are indicative of the “germinal” nature of the state itself. Its brief history, part of the dynamic of the Russian Revolution, is firmly embedded in the chronology of the Civil War, foreign interventions, and the establishment of the Soviet government. A number of stages can be distinguished over the course of the Gorskaya Republic’s political trajectory: first from the doctrine of self-determination to the birth of a political organization; then moving to its acquisition of power on actual territory (autonomy), to the proclamation of an independent state; and finally to the disappearance of this state as the leadership went into exile and the territory was incorporated into Soviet Russia.

The doctrine of mountain autonomism developed in 1905–1917 under the influence of reformist ideologies (primarily those of the Transcaucasian ethnic elites) and slogans supporting social and national liberation and the transformation of Russia along republican and federative lines. The February 1917 revolution made it possible to move from doctrine to the creation of a legal political organization, and by March the Union of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus and Daghestan had emerged in Vladikavkaz. This political association, which was loyal to the Russian Provisional Government in Petrograd, consolidated itself organizationally (electing an executive committee) and doctrinally (drafting a political platform and Union Constitution) by means of its first congress of mountain peoples. The charter it adopted was called a constitution and provided for a “federative design,” “the safeguarding of peace and order,” and “the furtherance of institutions of authority.” The union of mountain peoples was not a substitute for faltering Russian

governmental authority but was incorporated into it, and the leaders sent representatives to the “provisional governmental bodies”—the provincial executive committees of Terek and Daghestan Provinces—and to serve as provincial commissars for the Russian Provisional Government.

The events surrounding the Kornilov Affair and the pro-monarchists’ efforts to topple the Provisional Government in August 1917 forced the Union of Mountain Peoples to co-found the Southeastern Union of Cossack Hosts, Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and Free Peoples of the Steppe, a broad association loyal to the Provisional Government. The Southeastern Union had obvious designs on power and claimed to be helping to “establish a Russian democratic republic that would recognize the members of the [Southeastern] Union as its individual constituents” (*Soiuz ob’edinennykh gortsev*, p. 74).

The October Revolution in Petrograd and the collapse of the Provisional Government in Russia gave greater political weight to regional governments. The Southeastern Union, rejecting the new Bolshevik-led regime’s authority, created its own coalition Government of Southern Russia, one component of which was the Union of Mountain Peoples. This body performed a number of administrative functions in the mountain districts of Terek Province and Daghestan, and by November 1917 it had already defined itself as the Mountain Government, or the Government of Mountain Autonomy. Meanwhile, in the Cossack districts of Terek Province the functions of government were concentrated in the hands of the Terek Cossack Host. Terek Province’s two governments (both of which were constituents of the Southeastern Union) attempted to coordinate their actions, and in early December 1917 they formed the coalition Terek-Daghestan Provisional Government, located in Vladikavkaz.

However, the two aspiring governments proved incapable of working together effectively. By early January 1918 the failure of efforts to find a compromise between the land interests of highlanders and those of Cossacks could be seen in the grow-

ing wave of violence throughout the province. Amid political chaos, local focal points of real power took shape. In mountain districts, these were in the hands of ethnic councils, elected at national (ethnic) congresses, while in Cossack districts they were dominated by the Kazachy Krug (the Cossack Circle, a Host assembly) and military councils. At the same time Muslim movements were emerging among the mountain peoples of Daghestan and Chechnya that aimed to re-create a North Caucasus imamate.

From January through March 1918 a series of armed attacks, organized lootings, and pogroms formed a “front” of armed conflict between Cossack settlements and Chechen and Ingush villages along what had once been the Sunzha Defensive Line, as well as between neighboring Ossetian and Ingush villages. The Terek-Daghestan government ceased to exist, and its mountain component, the Mountain Government, was forced to flee from Vladikavkaz to Tiflis and Temir-Khan-Shura.

Since January 1918 the Congresses of the Peoples of the Terek, which included Cossacks and other factions, had become increasingly forceful in determining the regional political authority in Terek Province. At first the Congresses gave voice to a broad spectrum of political forces—from Cossack Circle centrists to non-Cossack Russian leftists (including members of the Socialist Revolutionary, Menshevik, and Bolshevik Parties) and highlander delegates who saw their own interests reflected in leftist slogans calling for the socialization of land. But at the first Congress in Mozdok, the forceful initiative of the Bolsheviks, whose delegation was headed by Sergey Kirov and Grigory Orjonikidze, began turning the Congresses into a vehicle for the sovietization of Terek Province’s main centers.

The second Congress in Pyatigorsk created new bodies of political authority: representative (in the form of a people’s council or soviet) and executive (in the form of a council of people’s commissars). In March 1918, after the Mountain Government fled the chaos that had engulfed Vladikavkaz, these