

1921: Early Administrative Divisions in the Soviet Caucasus

By autumn 1921 the entire Caucasus region (minus the territories conceded to Turkey) had been incorporated into the Soviet state. The region's new composition reflected the dynamic and inconsistent imposition of sovietization on a landscape that had taken shape over a long history and was replete with social and political problems. Clearly the Soviets' effort to structure the Caucasian territory could not be called harmonious or free of contradictions: there were too many competing interests and local problems that had to be navigated, to say nothing of the Soviets' own imperfectly developed political theories and principles of government. Furthermore, with the growth of authoritarian tendencies within the Bolshevik Party, strategic decision making was increasingly the product of behind-the-scenes battles within the small circle that was the Soviet-Bolshevik leadership and was starting to depend on the political thinking of a few influential figures.

Nevertheless, the overall logic governing the design of the new political and administrative map was clear. Taking military and economic considerations into account, the goal was to create institutions of controlled national self-determination. National (ethnic) groups, like social groups, were perceived by the Bolsheviks as collective parties to the historical process ("the oppressed," "forces of national liberation"). However, it should be noted that these groups had already become important categories in political calculations and administrative practice under the empire. During the Civil War and sovietization, the groups acquired their own political and organizational representation within various national councils and revolutionary committees. In Transcaucasia the institutionalization of ethnic categories reached, through the efforts of ethnic elites, the level of internationally recognized states. The Bolsheviks did not completely abolish this institutional form, but they harnessed its symbolic significance to their political ideology. Indeed, the new authorities exploited existing national solidarities, which had become extremely politicized during the Civil War, as support for their own socially messianic appeal: "Revolution brings liberation to

the people." In places where social liberation had long been expected to come in the form of national liberation, the Bolsheviks did not want to disappoint. The Soviet authorities tried to create institutions that were in tune with preexisting mass social aspirations toward liberation and self-determination while at the same time channeling these aspirations into a specific political mold. The Soviets needed a stable social base and the necessary cadres to govern the ethnic areas. The actual characteristics of the territory and status of such self-determined entities embodied the general twofold objective pursued by the Party of Lenin (the Soviet state) in the region—the consolidation of Soviet power and the carrying out of fundamental social transformation.

In 1920–1921 the initial composition of Soviet Caucasian national republics and autonomies was just taking shape, and each was generally seen as collectively "owned" by a particular ethnic group, an institutional result of ethnic self-determination. This aspect of the autonomies was reflected in the informal names they were given, such as the Republic of Mountain Peoples and the Autonomy of the Kabardin People. The most obvious category for the new authorities, the primary collective and historical actor in the North Caucasus, was the Gortsy (the plural form of *gorets*, or "mountain person," highlander). In November 1920, at the Congress of Peoples of Terek in Vladikavkaz and the Congress of Peoples of Daghestan in Temir-Khan-Shura, two mountain Soviet republics were proclaimed as part of the RSFSR. Out of the mountain districts of the former Terek Province emerged the Autonomous Gorskaya (Mountain) Socialist Soviet Republic (the Soviet reincarnation of the Gorskaya Republic of 1917–1919), and out of Daghestan Province the Autonomous Daghestan Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR), both of which were formally or officially established through a resolution of the All-Russian Central Committee on 20 January 1921. The Autonomous Gorskaya SSR consisted of six (essentially seven, including the Cossack Sunzha District) ethnic districts and two city (municipal) districts, Vladikavkaz (the capital) and Grozny.

The borders and status of Soviet national and administrative entities were not the result of Bolshevik political whim but the effect of applying and combining a set of criteria: ideological, ethnic, and economic. Any assertion that the process used by the Soviets in designing their state and creating its national-territorial subdivisions did not take into account how ethnic groups were distributed is probably unjust. It was simply that this criterion never could be and never was taken into account in isolation.

The internal composition of the new Autonomous Gorskaya SSR almost exactly preserved the borders of Terek Province's districts. Important administrative innovations were applied to resolve the question of Terek Cossack lands within the borders of the Autonomous Gorskaya SSR. In 1920–1922, as part of the first Soviet agrarian reforms and in an effort to equalize the distribution of lands and minimize the severity of farmland shortages in a number of districts, tens of thousands of highlanders were resettled in the plains that had belonged to the Cossack Hosts. In autumn 1920 the inhabitants of several Cossack stanitsas along what had been the Sunzha Defensive Line were deported, and their lands were incorporated into the Nazran and Grozny Districts (which became the Ingush and Chechen Districts, respectively, of the Autonomous Gorskaya SSR). The remaining Cossack stanitsas south of the Terek were at first supposed to be united into a single Sunzha (Cossack) District. But later these stanitsas were divided into three territorial segments. The first two, which were wedged into the Nalchik (Kabardin) and Vladikavkaz (Ossetian) Districts of the Autonomous Gorskaya SSR, were incorporated into these districts and constituted separate administrative subdivisions within them. The third group of stanitsas, inserted into Nazran and Grozny, two districts consisting primarily of Vainakhs (a name that began to be applied informally in the 1920s as an ethnic category comprised of Ingush and Chechens), was made into a separate Sunzha District, incorporating the settlements of Karabulakskaya, Troitskaya, Assinskaya, Nesterovskaya, Sleptsovskaya,