

1922–1928: Building a Soviet State out of a Multitude of Nations

In December 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established. The paradigm of a Soviet edifice constituted of many “ethnoterritories” with an administrative hierarchy of socialist nations and nationalities came somewhat later, when the idea of exporting the proletarian revolution was abandoned in favor of consolidating a proletarian fatherland and when it began to appear that the creation of a multilayer quasi-federative state was unavoidable.

The administrative reorganization of the region that followed was aimed at realizing Soviet ideology as well as the military, political, and economic strategies that went with it. The territorial structure and the precise drawing of internal borders were not planned in advance. From the beginning the region’s organization pitted clashing principles of economic demarcation, local group interests, and political and economic priorities against one another. There was an ongoing process of adjustment to the region’s administrative composition and reconsideration of institutional decisions. Overall, however, two main strategies were implemented during this period: Soviet national autonomies were established (gradually the idea of self-determination or ethnically specific administrative units extended all the way from “Soviet republics” to “ethnic village councils” and even “ethnic collective farms”) and the state’s basic administrative units were reorganized (which was necessitated by the priorities involved in developing the country’s economic infrastructure).

THE “NATIONAL PRINCIPLE” AND AUTONOMY

The principle of national self-determination was embodied in the use of ethnic criteria to organize authority and territory. But the very approach that gave rise to the creation in 1921 of the Gorskaya (Mountain) Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic, or ASSR (actually the Autonomous Gorskaya SSR; see the Note on Terminology at the end of this commentary) as a form of national self-determination for mountain peoples ultimately

served as the ideological basis for dismantling it. The Kabardin Communist elite, headed by Betal Kalmykov and spurred by the threat of a redistribution of lands in favor of neighboring ethnic districts, strove to reach a higher level of Kabardin self-determination, above and beyond the collective self-determination Kabarda shared with other highlanders within a common Gorskaya ASSR. With the support of influential figures in Moscow, the Kabardin District (Kabardinsky Okrug) left the Gorskaya ASSR and became the Kabardin Autonomous Province (oblast). This break represented a clash between one component of ideology and another: the rhetoric of self-determination was used to argue for the economic interests of an ethnic group despite the fact that this “self-determination” meant violating the principle of equal land distribution (on which Kalmykov’s opponents in neighboring districts based their arguments). The departure of Kabarda from the republic led to the gradual disintegration of the Gorskaya ASSR. In 1922 the Karachai, Balkar, and Chechen Districts left, as well as Grozny. Finally, on 7 July 1924, the republic was abolished and divided into the autonomous provinces of North Ossetia and Ingushetia, the Sunzha District, and the Vladikavkaz (City) District.

It was specifically internal conflict that led to the Gorskaya ASSR’s short history, and Moscow’s strategy in this case developed as the conflict developed. The absence of such conflict in the other mountain autonomy—Daghestan—resulted in a different scenario playing out there. Before the early Soviet epoch Daghestan had managed to avoid the degree of politicized ethnic rivalry that characterized Terek Province. The descent of mountain auls (villages) and their agriculture onto the Kumyk-populated plains had not yet begun, and land disputes there lacked the acrimony and resonance of an ethnic territorial conflict. Remaining in their traditional mountain pockets, the Daghestani highlanders were still an Islamic aggregate of numerous jamaats (rural communities) with their own local identities. The structure of this aggregate was politically more important and psychologically more essential than the configuration of

nominal ethnic areas, which in political terms could only begin to be traced with a tentative dotted line. The borders outlining the districts of the Daghestan ASSR almost completely reproduced prerevolutionary lines (which also did not match ethnic or linguistic borders), a fact that did not simplify the mapping of Daghestani jamaats in a way that would reflect ethnic distribution. However, the national (ethnic) principle in the creation of administrative zones affected Daghestan as well: by 1928–1929 reforms were being prepared and introduced that were designed to create mono-ethnic districts within the republic.

There was no initial plan for building the Soviet state that envisioned the multiplication of new autonomies. Generally young Soviet institutions and practices inherited political schemes, borders, and rivalries that had taken shape during earlier, pre-Soviet times. The creation of autonomies, their borders and statuses, was fraught with contradiction. The central government wavered in its decision making, while local interests and groups clashed. In 1922–1923 the South Ossetian and Mountain (Nagorny) Karabakh Autonomous Provinces (APs) were established. Their creation, status, and borders were a palliative and largely behind-the-scenes approach to resolving the bitter conflicts of 1918–1920. The decision by the All-Russian Communist Party’s Caucasus Bureau concerning Mountain Karabakh managed both to implement the “national principle” (providing autonomy for Karabakh Armenians) and, at the same time, to sidestep it (leaving the territory within Azerbaijan). This decision was not so much a sign of Bolshevik reverence for Kemalist Turkey as an internal conflict-mitigation compromise. The territory of Zangezur, once the forces of Garegin Njdeh were expelled during the summer of 1921, was mostly incorporated into Armenia. This brought about the strategically important “Megrin corridor” separating Azerbaijan from Turkey and Nakhichevan and connecting Armenia and Persia. Between Armenia and the Mountain Karabakh AP emerged the Kurdistan District (so-called Red Kurdistan), also a part of Azerbaijan. This turned the Mountain Karabakh autonomy into an enclave. (Probably initial plans