

Map 33

1929–1934: The Rise and Fall of the “National Principle” in Administrative Divisions

Map 34

1936–1938: The Constitutional Codification of a Hierarchy among Peoples and Territories

The second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s was an era of Soviet cultural ascendancy, the indigenization of schools, and the emergence of a government and Communist Party bureaucracy within ethnic autonomies. Many Caucasian peoples were becoming literate for the first time and beginning to develop a national literature. Ethnic groups were joining the ranks of Soviet national cadres involved first and foremost in the promotion of Soviet culture. The politics of indigenization helped implant Soviet ideology and practices into the practices and beliefs of indigenous groups, thereby serving as a means of inculcating Soviet political attitudes and cultural standards among national minorities. But the more effort the Soviets put into raising up the region’s autonomies, the more evident the limitations of the autonomies’ economies and infrastructures became. When autonomous provinces were first being established, some of their administrative centers had to be set up outside the province: in the case of the Adyghean Autonomous Province, in Krasnodar; North Ossetia and Ingushetia, in Vladikavkaz (renamed Orjonikidze in 1931); Chechnya, in Grozny; and some Karachai and Kabardin district centers, in Kislovodsk and Pyatigorsk, respectively. In the case of the united autonomy of Karachai-Cherkessia, which was split into two separate entities in 1926, the construction of two provincial centers was undertaken. And while Mikoyan-Shakhar (named for Anastas Mikoyan, then head of North Caucasus Territory [Severo-Kavkazsky Krai]) was built largely to serve as the Karachai autonomy’s capital, Erken-Shakhar never moved beyond the planning stage, and the provincial center of the Cherkess AP was moved to Batalpashinsk (a former Cossack stanitsa). The impulse to eliminate ethnic criteria in the drawing of administrative boundaries, as well as a departure from the principle of indigenization, was embedded in the very strategy for

building up national autonomies. If autonomies were to serve as platforms for national development, they had to have the appropriate economic infrastructure. This strategic emphasis on economics over ethnicity shaped a series of subsequent territorial expansions by autonomies at the expense of neighboring Russian districts and urban centers.

The move away from the national principle in organizing the territory’s administrative subdivisions began as early as 1928, when Chechen AP was strengthened by the addition of the oil-producing city of Grozny (even earlier it had benefited from allocations funded by oil revenues). At around the same time, Chechnya acquired the territory of Sunzha District (except for Terskaya stanitsa outside Mozdok). In 1931 a large portion of the former Batalpashinsky Russian subdistrict (raion), along with the chain of Cossack stanitsas stretching along the base of the mountains between Karachai and Cherkessia, was divided between these two autonomies, a move that also greatly enhanced their economies. In 1932 a portion of the Prokhladnensky District was incorporated into the Kabardin-Balkar AP (possibly as an alternative to the incorporation of Pyatigorsk, which as far back as 1922 had been seen as a possible center for the autonomy). Rivalry between North Ossetia and Ingushetia over Orjonikidze was ostensibly settled in 1933–1934 with the incorporation of the city into the North Ossetian AP and the merging of Ingushetia and Chechnya into a single Vainakh autonomy, the Chechen-Ingush AP. In 1936 Giaginskaya District and a portion of the Maikop District (along with Maikop itself, which then became the province’s administrative center) were incorporated into the Adyghean AP.

As ethnic provinces expanded, their titular populations became diluted. Furthermore, Soviet social dynamism and the emergence of new political undertakings (collectivization and

campaigns against “national opportunists,” the clergy, and the intelligentsia) began to weaken the perception of territories as collective ethnic property. The very institution of autonomy was transformed from a type of self-determination to the organization of minorities’ collective loyalty to the Soviet state and a way to prepare them for the new horizons of the Soviet era.

A shift in the political content of the autonomy (from an institution of self-determination to an ordinary Soviet administrative unit) helped neutralize any hierarchical relationship between the titular groups and their new Russian populations. The indigenization and ethnic preferences that had been built into the old model no longer worked, and Russians saw national autonomies as little different from other administrative units—they were all part of a single country. The autonomies themselves had an interest in territorial expansion, for both economic and culturally symbolic reasons. Greater economic opportunities and the acquisition of capital cities opened up new possibilities for national elites and bureaucracies.

So by the mid-thirties, with the Soviet system firmly established in the ethnic provinces, autonomization and indigenization were abandoned as outdated political tools. In an era when the main priority was consolidating the socialist state, socioeconomic and geopolitical expediency were seen as more fitting aims than indigenization. The effort to strengthen autonomies economically led to the introduction of new administrative cadres and repressive measures designed to promote the country’s cultural and ideological homogeneity.

In 1938 minority languages that had used Latin scripts (introduced in the 1920s) began using new Cyrillic-based alphabets, with the exception of Abkhaz and Ossetian within Georgia, which switched to Georgian-based scripts. Ossetian was once