

How Stalin Created Some of the Post-Soviet World's Worst Ethnic Conflicts
By Robert Coalson in The Atlantic
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Eighty-one-year-old Nikolai Khasig was born in Sukhumi in 1932. It was just one year after Soviet dictator Josef Stalin stripped Abkhazia of its short-lived status as a full-fledged republic of the USSR and made it a region of Soviet Georgia.

At the end of 1936, Lavrenty Beria -- at that time the head of the Transcaucasia region and later the sadistic head of Stalin's secret police -- invited the popular Abkhaz leader Nestor Lakoba to dinner at his house in Tbilisi. Lakoba died suddenly -- officially, of a heart attack, but it was widely believed that the former revolutionary comrade of Stalin's had been poisoned.

In the repressions that began in 1937, the entire Abkhaz government was arrested and subjected to show trials. Soviet archives later revealed that Beria had ordered them all executed before the trials even began. Collectivization came to Abkhazia with a vengeance. Soviet publications began arguing that the Abkhaz were actually of Georgian origin in the first place.

"Such violence, such humiliation, such abuse, such genocide," Khasig recalls. "Our people never experienced such things before."

In a sense, World War II was something of a respite, but the work begun in the 1930s continued as soon as the war was over. By that time, Khasig was in high school.

"In 1945, after the end of the war, Abkhaz schools were shut down and the policy of forced assimilation was begun," he says. "Our children -- we ourselves -- studied in the Georgian language and didn't know a single word [of Abkhaz]. We were simply cut off."

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, all this old resentment and more surged to the surface.

In 1992, war broke out in Abkhazia -- with Abkhaz separatists joined in their struggle by representatives of other aggrieved Caucasus nations such as Chechens, Circassians, Ossetians, and Cossacks.

The Abkhaz were also actively supported by the Russian military. An estimated 8,000 people were killed and as many as 240,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced.

After the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Abkhazia's de facto independence was recognized by Russia and a handful of other countries. Georgia and most of the international community says the region is occupied by Russia. Khasig, despairingly, describes Abkhazia as "a Russian colony."

Bizarre Border Policies, Wholesale Deportations

The guns of war flared elsewhere as well in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. And these similar ethnic conflicts, many of which were exacerbated by Soviet policies six decades earlier, have come to be called "Stalin's time bombs."

Such conflicts, spanning from Central Europe to the intricate patchwork of exclaves that comprises the borders of Central Asia, are in many ways direct legacies of the shifting nationalities policies that were often brutally implemented during the nearly 30 years that Stalin towered over the Soviet Union.

These disputed places include the disputed ethnic-Armenian region of Azerbaijan called Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia's North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, its neighboring republics, and the breakaway Moldovan region of Transdniester.

From bizarre border policies and the wholesale deportation of ethnic groups to the mass importation of ethnic Russians to various regions, Stalin's policies created or aggravated conflicts that remain central to understanding Eurasia today.

Under Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin -- and later in the early years of Stalin's rule -- the Soviet government argued that nationalism was the bane of the imperial system. They tried to develop policies that would transform the multinational Eurasian space into a unified Soviet, socialist state.

"It was only by transforming the economic and social bases -- and the cultural basis, because [Stalin] paid a lot of attention to that -- of the nationalities that they would become fully integrated into a single socialist state," says Stephen Blank, a professor of national security studies at the U.S. Army War College and the author of a book on Stalin's time as Soviet nationalities commissar. "And the overwhelming thrust of his policies [was] to create that centralized, socialist system and that, he believed, would answer the nationalities problem."

Terry Martin, director of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University and coauthor of "A State Of Nations: Empire And Nation-Building In The Age Of Lenin And Stalin," agrees, but adds that the Soviets created problems from the beginning by trying to draw borders too precisely along ethnic lines in places where ethnic identities were still evolving.

"If they did anything that created ethnic conflict, they created ethnic conflict by trying to draw the borders too precisely," he says. "That is, they created a lot of ethnic mobilization around borders in the 1920s as people lobbied to get one border and lobbied various people to identify with their nationality and not with another in areas where nationality was very fluid, like Central Asia. Most of the modern nationalities that we have [today] hadn't even been formed yet."

According to Martin, as the Stalin era wore on and the Soviet Union embarked on a phase of intense, centralized economic modernization, the nationalities policy shifted.

"In the mid-1930s you start to get the notion of Russians as being the first among equals," he says. "And you get this kind of formalized under the slogan of the 'friendship of the peoples.' So, at this point, there is a friendship in which Russians are the big brother or the dominant player."

Less Bloody Than Previous Collapses

Historians are still arguing about many of the fateful decisions of the Stalin era. Consider Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic-Armenian region nestled in the heart of Azerbaijan. Paul Goble, who served as an adviser on Soviet nationalities to U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, says the region was given to Azerbaijan as a way of cementing Moscow's role as arbiter between Baku and Yerevan.

Martin believes the decision to give the territory to the Turkic Azerbaijanis was made in part to mollify neighboring Turkey at a time of Soviet geopolitical vulnerability.

And Russian ethnographer Anatoly Yamskov has argued the decision was made so that shepherds could move between highland and lowland grazing grounds without crossing a republican border.

Whatever the logic of its origins, Karabakh continues to be an intermittent flashpoint in the Caucasus and has defined relations between the South Caucasus countries (and their relations with Russia) since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Likewise, conflicts in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajara have crippled Georgia's post-Soviet development. The same is true of Moldova's Transdniester region and Russia's restive North Caucasus.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has spent a great deal of time and effort at resolving the conflicts since its establishment as a permanent organization in 1994.

Although the conflicts stemming from Stalin's time bombs have left tens of thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced and have drained the political and economic resources of many post-Soviet countries, Martin points out that the collapse of the Soviet Union, so far at least, has been less bloody and less violent than the collapse of many other empires.

"If you compare it to the collapse of the British Empire in India, again, the question is why were things so calm?" he asks. "If -- as I did once for a conference -- you compare the collapse of the Russian Empire in Kazakhstan to the collapse of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan, the question again was why did things go so calmly in Kazakhstan."

Such arguments are little comfort to people like Ludmila Cusariov.

In 1992, she was a teacher in the village of Cocieri. Although living on the eastern bank of the Dniester River, Cocieri's inhabitants fought against the separatist forces of Transdniestria. Cusariov's husband and uncle were killed in the fighting.

"My mother was also injured during this conflict," she says. "They bombed us and shot at us from two directions -- from the villages of Dubasari and Roghi. When the firing stopped from one direction, it started from the other."

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