

Conflicting Narratives: History and Politics in the Caucasus

Veranstalter: Nada Boškovska / Jeronim Perović, Historisches Seminar, Universität Zürich

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Nobody would dispute that in order to understand the outbreak of a violent conflict, it is important to have a basic grasp of the historical context. The difficulty is that in regions such as the multi-ethnic Caucasus, the interpretation of history itself is often part of these long and protracted conflicts. The conflicts in the Caucasus, but also in other regions of Eastern Europe, are largely conflicts about identity, and these identity conflicts almost always involve conflicts over historical truth, over the „right“ interpretation of history.

It was with this in mind that the organizers of this three-day conference, Nada Boškovska and Jeronim Perović (both Zurich), compiled the program for the conference. The goal was not to come to an ultimate conclusion about who is right and who is wrong in their views on history, but to identify the conflicting narratives, to analyse how specific contested issues are talked about, and, in particular, to understand the role of history and historical myths in these conflicts. As this was not a conference on history exclusively, the program included not just historians, but also political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists, each applying his or her unique theoretical and methodological approach. This mix of disciplines was reflected in the composition of participants, half of whom were from the Caucasus region while the other half was based at research institutions and universities in Russia, Europe, and the US. Consequently, the event also aimed to provide a platform for intense debate among scholars from different parts of the world.

The first panel was opened by political scientist BRUNO COPPIETER (Brussels), who elaborated on the concept of „Forgotten Conflicts“ both at the level of theory and in the practical case of Abkhazia, from the early 1990s to the present time. The second panel in-

dicated how nationalism, memory, and identity are closely interrelated. ARSÈNE SAPAROV (Michigan) analysed manifestations of nationalism in the case of the mass demonstration of 1965 in Yerevan on the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, which is an example of how the Soviet leadership under Krushchev gave in to popular demands. Based on a large number of in-depth interviews, ANA KIRVALIDZE (Tbilisi) in her presentation investigated the evolution of the Georgian collective memory by comparing generational attitudes. While all categorized generations regard the „liberation“ from the Soviet Union as essential for national identity, attitudes towards specific moments of Soviet history vary greatly, with the older generation having a generally more positive attitude than the younger one. Krivalidze noted a lack of specific knowledge about the Soviet past among the younger generation.

In the third panel HRANT MIKAELIAN (Yerevan) focused on Georgian national movements and uprisings in the early 20th century. One of several important preconditions for the movements was a high educational level in the urban space combined with an agrarian overpopulation. In Batumi and other cities, workers demanding better conditions played an important role for the development of the national movements. OLIVER REISNER (Tbilisi) turned his attention to the role of historians in the formation of Georgian national identity in the 1940s. While the Georgian historians' conception was in line with an overall Soviet understanding of ethno-genesis and ethno-territorial nationalism, it was the basis for Georgia's national manifestation giving the Georgian „titular“ nation predominance, claiming exclusive rights of Georgians over territory inhabited by non-Georgian minority groups. According to Reisner, this process of national identity-building has been only very little historicised to date. MAURICO BORRERO (New York) turned his focus to the area of sports as means of shaping the identities of Soviet nations. As his investigation of the football club Dinamo Tbilisi showed, this had a large impact on the development of Georgian nationalism in the late Soviet period.

ERIK DAVTYAN (Yerevan) opened the

fourth panel by discussing Georgia's policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1918. He pointed out that Georgia's „brinkmanship policy“ towards its neighbours could not have been practiced without the involvement of Germany. As soon as the Germans left, however, Georgia's policy became more conciliatory. SARAH SLYE (Istanbul) focussed on movements for a trans-Caucasian federation that emerged after the Russian Revolution, and the continuation of such ideas among Caucasian émigré groups in the early 1920s, namely Prometheus and Kavkaz. Even though the movements followed the same ideas and hopes, they were competing with each other. Slye demonstrated that the idea of Caucasian unity, which was never accomplished as a political project, existed and was a considerable force to be reckoned with during the years of the Russian Revolution and Civil War.

In the fifth panel TIMOTHY BLAUVELT (Tbilisi) presented the story of Nestor Lakoba's rise to political power in Abkhazia in the 1920s and 1930s, illustrating the importance of informal personal networks and patronage. DAVID JISHKARIANI (Tbilisi) looked at diverse narratives of Abkhaz and Georgian historians from the 1940s onwards, arguing that different interpretations of the past were a major reason why both sides saw their struggle for sovereignty and territory as legitimate, each claiming to protect their „national historical justice“. CLAIRE KAISER (Philadelphia) presented her research findings on the „Georganisation“ attempts in the later Soviet period, especially drawing on the case of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. She argued that beneath the veneer of the Soviet „fraternity of peoples“, nationality during the Krushchev and Brezhnev periods acquired real meaning for citizens in Georgia and revealed the tension between concurrent and responsive national mobilizations in the same territorial space.

ELLI PANOMAREVA (St. Petersburg) opened the sixth panel with a discussion of narratives shared in Tbilisi's Georgian and Armenian populations. Ponomareva analysed historical narratives produced by Armenians and Georgians in assessing the role of the Armenians of Tbilisi, from the late Soviet period up to the establishment of Georgia as an independent state. Since Ar-

menians have long formed a substantial part of Tbilisi's population, they have contributed the city's cultural heritage and thus claim to be entitled to equal rights with today's ethnic Georgian majority. The Georgians, on the other hand, often attempt to present the Armenians of Tbilisi as newcomers and guests in the city, which they portray as inherently Georgian. The main goal of the presentation by SHALALA MAMMADOVA (Baku) was to examine how and for what purposes the various political groups in Azerbaijan during the first quarter of the 20th century bolstered nationalism, repeatedly leading to violent ethnic clashes. KRISTA GOFF (Miami) discussed the role minorities play for Azeri identity construction, using the example of Azerbaijan's Georgian Ingilo. Based on extensive field trips and numerous interviews, Goff concluded that Soviet nationality practices, as well as co-ethnic relationships such as the Georgian attempts to „claim“ Azerbaijan's Georgian Ingilo as part of the Georgian nation, have made Azeri officials unwilling to grant the Georgian Ingilo and other minorities like the Talysh any place in the national history.

MKHITAR GABRIELIAN (Yerevan) opening the seventh panel presented the possibilities of using photographs as a historical source. From the 1920s until the end of the 1960s, various photographic expeditions to Nagorno-Karabakh were undertaken. The hitherto unknown photographs taken during the different expeditions thus allow glimpses of the changes that the region experienced over time. The photographs provide unique ethnographic evidence of daily life and contacts in the ethnically mixed Armenian-Azeri area. KATJA DOOSE (Tübingen) focused on the Armenian earthquake of 1988, analysing how this major natural disaster provided further opportunities to foster animosities between Armenians and Azerbaijani. She argued that the earthquake served as powerful political and rhetorical platform for all involved parties of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. While Armenians perceived the earthquake as an anthropogenic event that was part of a larger conspiracy to weaken the Armenian nation, Azerbaijani saw it as a rightful punishment for Armenian

misbehaviour. She thus concluded that the disaster served as a catalyst for the escalation of ethnic tensions. SERGEY RUMYANSEV (Berlin) presented an example of a peaceful interethnic cooperation between Azerbaijani and Armenian citizens. The Armenian village of Kyzyl-Shafag and the Azeri village of Kerkendj had been ethnically mixed communities with contact and exchanges before the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. As tensions rose during the 1980s, they decided autonomously to swap their domiciles. Rumyansev participated in a project that aimed to detect the histories of that village swap more than 20 years after the conflict. The idea was to re-evaluate the narrations of the conflict, where the interethnic contacts on a local and collective level are often overlooked.

References to history serve as important instruments for people to claim certain territorial rights and to demand historical justice. Examining selected cases in the North Caucasus, VIKTOR SHNIRELMAN (Moscow) as first speaker of the eighth panel demonstrated the importance of making reference to indigenous ancestors and powerful medieval states in order for various ethnic groups to claim such rights. Differing narratives of the past may lead to conflict among these groups, which sometimes compete for the same territories. The legendary Imam Shamil (1797-1871), who led the armed resistance of the North Caucasian mountain people against the Russian Empire in the 19th century, was at the centre of LARS KARL's (Leipzig) presentation. By showing how the image of Shamil was treated in later historical-political debates, Karl demonstrated how the historical remembrance of such a key figure underwent various changes, serving differing functions and purposes. MAGOMED GIZBUALEV (Dagestan) analysed Russian national identity politics in Dagestan, which he identified as a source of the region's instability. He argued that Russia practised a hegemonic historical narrative in which Dagestani cultural values have been marginalized.

Did the Armenian genocide of 1915 play a role in the genesis and outbreak of the Karabakh war in the late 1980s and early 1990s? With this question, VICKEN CHETERIAN (Geneva / London) launched the last

panel. Contrary to most of the existing analysis on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Cheterian argued that the unresolved historical legacy of the Armenian genocide influenced the emergence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, and continues to be an obstacle to Armenian-Azeri reconciliation until today. Cheterian stressed that in order to understand how the two events were connected, it is important to consider the Turkish discourse on the Armenian genocide of the 1980s, as this discourse was later adopted by Azerbaijan. The last two speakers, IAN LANZILLOTTI (Athens, TN) and FEDERICO SALVATI (Rome), both dealt with the North Caucasian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Lanzillotti focused on the „nativisation“ („korenizatsiia“) policy of the Soviet Union from the late 1940s until the mid-1960s. This policy, he argued, was an important tool for actively and directly promoting ethnic-national consciousness, languages, and traditions among the various nations of multi-ethnic Soviet state, including the Balkars and the Kabardians. As he indicated „Nativization“-policy was part of a larger Soviet campaign. Salvati then addressed the question of how the memory of the Balkars' deportation under Stalin shaped modern Balkar identity. Based on some 150 interviews, Salvati demonstrated that while the memory of the deportation contributed to the consolidation of a strong group identity among the Balkars, it did not, as in the case of other deported nations such as the Chechens, result in ethnic clashes or opposition to the Moscow centre.

The conference's presentations showed very clearly that a multi-faceted approach is inspiring and undoubtedly necessary in order to approach a region as complex as the Caucasus. It promotes a more self-reflective consciousness of the past that is indispensable for detecting the instrumentalisation and politicisation of history. Further exchanges in this vein would be desirable as a way of enabling scientists to fulfil their responsibilities as experts in debates over conflicting narratives. A publication of a selection of papers would certainly be most welcome.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Nada Boškowska & Jeronim Perović (University of Zurich)

Panel 1. Politics, History, and Conflict

Chair: Nada Boškowska (Zurich)

Bruno Coppieters (Vrije Universiteit Brussels): On the Concept of „Forgotten Conflicts“

Panel 2. Nationalism, Memory, and Identity: Armenia and Georgia

Chair: Nicolas Hayoz (Fribourg)

Arsène Saparov (University of Michigan): The National(ist) Revival in Soviet Armenia during Krushchev’s Rule

Ana Kirvalidze (Ilia State University, Tbilisi): The (Re)Creation of Collective Memory and National Identity: The Case of Georgia

Panel 3. Origins of Georgian Nationalism in the 20th Century

Chair: Carmen Scheide (St. Gallen)

Hrant Mikaelian (Caucasus Institute & National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Yerevan): Uprisings in Georgia, 1900–1917

Oliver Reisner (Ilia State University, Tbilisi): Uprisings in Georgia, 1900–1917

Mauricio Borrero (St. John’s University, New York): Identity Through Sport: The Case of Dinamo Tbilisi and Georgian Football

Panel 4. Caucasia Between „Unity“ and Conflict in Historical Perspective

Chair: Hans-Lukas Kieser (University of Zurich)

Erik Davtyan (State University Yerevan): Transcaucasia under the German-Ottoman Rule: Georgia’s Brinkmanship Policy toward Armenia and Azerbaijan, May–November 1918

Sarah Slye (Turkey): Kavkaz. The True Face of the Movement for a Caucasian Confederation

Panel 5. Georgian-Abkhaz Relations

Chair: Eva-Maria Auch (Berlin)

Timothy Blauvelt (Ilia State University, Tbilisi): Clientalism and Policy in Early Soviet Abkhazia, 1921–54

David Jishkariani (Ilia State University, Tbilisi): In the Name of Historical Justice. Historical Narratives as a Battlefield of Georgian and

Abkhaz Historians

Claire Kaiser (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia): Nationalization and its Discontents: Georgian and Abkhaz Entanglements, 1945–1978

Panel 6. The Caucasus as Contested Space

Chair: Bruno Coppieters (Brussels)

Elli Ponomareva (European University, St. Petersburg): Tbilisi as Contested Space. Comparing Georgian and Armenian Historical Narratives

Shalala Rafik Mammadova (ADA University, Baku): Enemy Nation. To Destroy In Order To Survive

Krista Goff (University of Miami): Ethnogenesis as Politics in National Minority Regions

Panel 7. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Chair: Oliver Reisner (Tbilisi)

Mkhitar Gabrielyan (State University Yerevan): Archiving Daily Life: The Photo Collection of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography as a Source for the History of Karabakh in the Soviet Period

Katja Doose (University of Tübingen): The Armenian Earthquake of 1988. A Perfect Stage for the Karabakh Conflict?

Sergey Rumyansev (Humboldt University, Berlin): The Karabakh Conflict and Peaceful Interethnic Cooperation. The Case of Collective Village Swap

Panel 8. The North Caucasus

Chair: Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Konstanz)

Viktor Shnirelman (Russian Academy of Science, Moscow): Imagining Ancestors—Producing Conflict

Lars Karl (University of Leipzig): (Re-)Inventing a Rebel: The Case of Imam Shamil in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union

Magomed Gizbulaev (Dagestan branch of the Russian Academy of Science): Dagestan and Russia: Competing Narratives of Identity and Values in Historical Perspective

Panel 9. Trauma, Deportation, and Genocide

Chair: Jeronim Perović (Zurich)

Vicken Cheterian (Webster University Geneva)

& University of London): Uses and Abuses of History: Genocide and the Making of the Karabakh Conflict

Ian Lanzillotti (Tennessee Wesleyan College): „Nativization“ in the Kabardian ASSR and the Re-Establishment of Kabardino-Balkaria, 1948–1965

Federico Salvati (La Sapienza University, Rome): The Balkars Deportation and the Effects of its Narrative on the Current

Final Discussion

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