



BOOK REVIEW

HISTORY

Mobilizing in Uncertainty: Collective Identities and War in Abkhazia

By Anastasia Shesterinina. *Mobilizing in Uncertainty: Collective Identities and War in Abkhazia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021, 258 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-5376-3

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This book is a rich study of the dynamics of war mobilization among the Abkhaz population of Abkhazia in August 1992—then part of a newly independent state of Georgia. The core of the book is 150 in-depth interviews conducted by Anastasia Shesterinina in 2011 on the prewar, wartime, and postwar Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in three regions of Abkhazia. Her interviews are organized around a very precise moment: August 14–18, 1992, when her interviewees, 90 percent of whom identified as Abkhaz, first became aware that irregular Georgian military forces had invaded Abkhazia. To accumulate this store of interviews, Shesterinina visited Abkhazia multiple times and lived there for considerable stretches, working to build trust with her interviewees. She also supplemented this impressive core with archival research, interviews beyond Abkhazia, and thorough reading on civil war mobilization for two years as a post-doctoral fellow at Yale University. The result is a wonderful book—superbly organized, clearly written, and well argued. The book’s methodological design and scholarship are first rate. Indeed, the book was recently co-awarded the Charles Taylor Book Award from the Interpretative Methodologies and Methods group of the American Political Science Association.

Shesterinina is a political scientist, so her book is emplotted in the manner of many works in the field. First there is a puzzle: “How do ordinary people navigate uncertainty to make mobilization decisions in civil war?” This question, however, already foregrounds the conceptual innovation that Shesterinina wants to present: the experience of uncertainty. It also reveals the implicit methodological individualism and decisionist bias that structures how most political scientists study civil war. Rational decision-making by fully formed individuals is the default, and all theories have to work within its orbit. A mobilization decision is understood as the choice to join an armed group.

Second, there is the core argumentative claim about causal mechanisms. Shesterinina writes that the centrality of uncertainty emerges as an “ethnographic surprise” from her work. Steered by the rational choice literature on mobilization as a cost-benefit risk calculation, she learns that her respondents did not experience it that way at all. Rather, their experience was one of shock and then decision-making—essentially fight or flight—about the perceived threat undertaken largely at what she called the “quotidian level,” namely among family and friends. People interpreted the threat differently. Shesterinina argues that people drew upon collective conflict identities that developed before the war through their encounter and participation with everyday political contention and disputes. Faced with rising incidents and tensions, they made sense of the situation through collective threat framing, which



Shesterinina calls an “information filtering mechanism.” “In a context where violence can have different meanings, ordinary people rely on shared history and familiar social networks to understand who is threatened, by whom, and to what extent and how to act in response” (pp. 2–3). She describes this argument as having two analytical parts, one that is an historical approach to mobilization and the second as a social relational one. “Mobilization does not take place in a vacuum, absent shared conflict history and the social networks that feed everyday life.” She summarizes her argument as a “sociohistorical approach to mobilization” (p. 3).

I will confess some impatience with this argument. Who, beyond perhaps the most parsimonious rational choice political scientists, ever assumes that mobilization takes place in a vacuum, that it is an isolated asocial act? And why would one ever assume that prewar processes and contentions can be bracketed from the onset of so-called civil war? Shesterinina’s argument is compelling but burdened by overstated contrasts and a need to uncover seemingly clear transcendent causal mechanisms to explain one moment of decision. At the same time, there are surprising absences from Shesterinina’s work. There is no Rogers Brubaker on conflict identities and groupism, no Monica Duffy Toft on territorial identity (her case study was Abkhazia), and no Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud on the “sons of the soil” status of the ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia. These, however, are minor quibbles next to the real strength of the book because Shesterinina’s “sociohistorical approach” to the onset of war really delivers intellectually.

It is in her empirical research that the real richness of the book is revealed. In a series of compelling chapters, Shesterinina provides us with the best English-language account I have read of the origins and eventful processes that prefigured the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Chapter 3 provides an excellent account of Soviet Abkhazia and the historical origins of the grievances of ethnic Abkhaz against the Georgian migrants who moved to the region under the rule of Stalin and his local enforcer, Beria. Chapter 4 gives us a real flavor of the rise of political polarization in Abkhazia as the Soviet Union collapsed and the shift from elite contention to the participation of ordinary people. Chapter 5 is a detailed account of those four days in August that are the locus of Shesterinina’s interest. She presents this as a process of threat framing at the national level that was adapted at the local level and consolidated at the quotidian level, her term for the micro-world of family and friends. She outlines a series of available decision possibilities and describes the pathways chosen. Her finding is that people made very different mobilization choices—which she helpfully relaxes to including not only the choice not to mobilize (that is, to flee) but also in viewing mobilization as an ongoing process that allows initial non-joiners to later become joiners—and that existing mobilization theories that stress prewar activism, social networks and rational risk assessment does not account for this variability. There’s no simple causal story in the end.

The final three chapters consider the war dynamics itself and the uneasy peace established in post-war Abkhazia until its recognition in 2008 by the Russian Federation as an independent state. The final chapter points to how the concept of uncertainty, and her other arguments, can be applied elsewhere to study civil war trajectories. In sum, this is a book that will be of interest to political scientists for its qualitative methodology and theory discussions. What makes it worthwhile for students of Russia and its neighborhood is how it brings to life the story of a neglected and bitter war in the Caucasus with original field research and considerable empathy for those caught up in it.