

# NESTED NATIONALISM

MAKING AND UNMAKING NATIONS  
IN THE SOVIET CAUCASUS

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## **What's Yours Is Mine: Nation-Building and Extraterritorial Nationhood Inside the South Caucasus**

The wartime legitimization of transborder nationhoods breathed new life into territorial and national disputes in the South Caucasus. Whether Stalin thought he had a real chance at adding Iranian or Turkish territory to the USSR or merely participated in these high-stakes maneuvers to achieve a greater sphere of influence and key economic goals, many of his partners in the South Caucasus were sincerely committed to Soviet southward expansion. As geopolitical tensions intensified between Moscow and its rivals in Tehran and Ankara, and while Bagirov managed Soviet operations in Iranian Azerbaijan, Armenian and Georgian elites turned their gaze inward and devised plans to alter the map of the Soviet South Caucasus.

Arutiunov renewed contestation over Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast' in November 1945. Petitioning Moscow to adjoin the territory to Armenia on the basis of economic, ethnographic, and political claims, he invoked arguments similar to those developed for aspirations to Turkish territory. That same month, Georgian First Secretary Kandid Charkviani rekindled Georgia's long-standing claim to the three regions of Azerbaijan—Balakan, Zaqatala, and Qakh—that were home to Georgian-Ingilois (as well as Avars, Lezgins, Mugals, Tsakhurs, Laks, Azeris, and others). Georgians and Georgian-Ingilois called this area Saingilo, or land of the Ingilo. Bagirov vigorously rejected Armenian and Georgian pretensions to Soviet Azerbaijani territory, asserting that if the transfer of Azerbaijani territories to Georgia and Armenia was under serious consideration, then Azerbaijan had claims of its

own—to the Azizbekov (Azizbeyov), Vedi, and Garabaglar regions of Armenia, the Borchali region of Georgia, and the Derbent and Kasumkent areas of the Dagestan ASSR in Russia.<sup>79</sup>

Charkviani explicitly linked the Soviet occupation of northern Iran—and the potential for Soviet Azerbaijani territorial expansion there—to his own plans to annex Azerbaijani territory. Stalin had previously denied Charkviani's requests to renegotiate Saingilo's status out of concern that it would set a dangerous precedent, but Charkviani apparently felt that wartime developments like the Soviet occupation of Iran and Georgia's acquisition of some Chechen, Ingush, and Balkar territories after their respective deportations during the war had vitiated this concern.<sup>80</sup> According to Charkviani's memoir, when he reignited the issue in 1945, Stalin told him that, if "Southern Azerbaijan" was resolved in the USSR's favor, then "the issue of your Saingilo will also be resolved." As Charkviani later concluded, "Saingilo's destiny remained unchanged" because the Soviet Union had lost its contest for Iran.<sup>81</sup>

M. G. Seidov, an Azerbaijani CP secretary in the 1940s, also coupled geopolitics with internal territorial disputes in his memoir. Recounting a conversation among Bagirov, Beria, and Anastas Mikoyan in the Kremlin in 1945, Seidov reported that Beria and Mikoyan told Bagirov that the unification of Iranian Azerbaijan and Soviet Azerbaijan was nearly complete and jokingly asked whether it would now be possible to transfer Nagorno-Karabakh and Saingilo from Azerbaijan to Armenia and Georgia, respectively.<sup>82</sup> Beria and Mikoyan's role in Seidov's recollection underscore that Charkviani and Arutunov likely drafted their proposals after conversations with—and endorsements from—central party leaders.

Kremlin-backed irredentism brought opportunities to reshape republican power, resources, and demographics but also reinforced other impulses among Soviet republican nation-builders seeking to advance the assimilatory policies that came into force at the close of the 1930s. Let us take Georgia as our primary example. Georgian pretensions to historic lands in Turkey and Azerbaijan are best understood when contextualized with other policies—namely, national deportations and assimilatory practices—that often expanded titular footprints at the expense of nontitular minority communities in the Soviet Union. While these practices were implemented across the USSR with Kremlin sanction or direction, Moscow's role should not overshadow the agency of local political actors and national community leaders.

Charkviani and Beria were at the center of nation-building efforts in Georgia. Beria, who preceded Charkviani as Georgian first secretary, had since risen through the ranks to become head of the NKVD and deputy chairman of the Sovnarkom, but he was still deeply involved in the region, exerting signifi-

cant influence over the first secretaries of the three republics—who were all connected to his extensive patronage network.<sup>83</sup> Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Georgian leadership agitated to categorize Mingrelians, Adjaraans, Laz, and Svans as Georgians rather than as separate peoples in Soviet censuses. With the all-Union contraction of Soviet nationality categories in the 1939 census, this goal was achieved, increasing the purported percentage of Georgians in Georgia by reducing the number of documented national minorities.

Two minority populations—Ossetians and Abkhazians—were perhaps shielded from bureaucratic erasure by their territorial autonomies in Georgia, but Beria and Charkviani still sought to subordinate them to the Georgian nation. Consider Abkhazia and Abkhazians. In 1931, Abkhazia's political status was downgraded. It had been categorized as a treaty republic (SSR) associated with Georgia (itself an unusual arrangement), but, in 1931, was converted into an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) and made a constituent part of Georgia. As first secretary in Georgia in the 1930s, Beria used the terror to remake Abkhazia, first eliminating his political competition, Chairman of Abkhazia's Central Executive Committee Nestor Apollonovich Lakoba, then dismantling Lakoba's mostly Abkhazian political network and stacking the political apparatus with people loyal to him instead. He also initiated resettlement policies that brought tens of thousands of Georgians and Mingrelians to Abkhazia, replaced and translated Abkhazian and Russian place names with Georgian ones, and swapped out the Latin-based script of the Abkhazian language with one based on Georgian.<sup>84</sup> This shift to a Georgian script in 1937 was a unique assertion of titular influence given the broader Soviet trend of replacing Latin scripts for Avar, Azerbaijani, Tajik, Uzbek, and other languages with Cyrillic in the late 1930s. Unlike these other languages, which had initially shifted from Arabic to Latin scripts in the 1920s, Abkhazian had transitioned from a Cyrillic alphabet instituted in the late nineteenth century to Latin and then Georgian over the course of the 1920s and 1930s (a Cyrillic alphabet was reintroduced in 1954).

As first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party from 1938 to 1952, Charkviani continued earlier efforts to assimilate Abkhazians into the Georgian nation and marginalize them in the ASSR. In the 1945–1946 school year, Charkviani and First Secretary of Abkhazia Akaki Mgeladze transformed Abkhazian-language schools into Georgian schools where Abkhazian, like Russian, would be a subject of study rather than the instructional language.<sup>85</sup> Up to this point, more than 9,000 students in 81 schools studied in Abkhazian language before transitioning to Russian in the fifth grade.<sup>86</sup> The political leadership justified the switch to Georgian as a fix for students who struggled when changing languages

in fifth grade and portrayed the Georgian language as an ethnohistorical advancement for Abkhazians who were supposedly already accustomed to it thanks to centuries of “idyllic” exposure to the Georgian cultural milieu (*v krug gruzinskoj kul'tury*).<sup>87</sup> Charkviani and Mgeladze continued and intensified Beria's efforts to place trusted colleagues in power positions in Abkhazia, move Georgians to the territory, and replace Abkhazian toponyms with Georgian ones.<sup>88</sup>

Working with Beria and other party leaders in Moscow, the Georgian leadership also cleansed Georgia's diverse population by deporting targeted nationalities to Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and Siberia. There were two main waves of deportation. In July 1944, Stalin, as head of the State Defense Committee (GKO), approved the deportation of 86,000 Turks, Kurds, and Khemshins (also known as Khemshils) from Georgian regions (Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki, Bogdanov, and the Adjar ASSR) bordering Turkey to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>89</sup> The deportation was swift: before the end of the first day more than 26,000 people had been loaded into east-bound trains.<sup>90</sup> Approximately 95,000 “special settlers” were deported from Georgia at this time.<sup>91</sup> Brutal conditions on the trains and in the special settlements contributed to significant death rates among deportees.<sup>92</sup> In 1949, Operation Volna brought another wave of expulsions to the South Caucasus, with the majority of deportees (43,344) coming from Georgia.<sup>93</sup>

On the one hand, these deportations can be understood as part of a broader impulse in the Soviet Union to defend geopolitically vulnerable borderlands by targeting and ultimately punishing nationalities constructed as untrustworthy and accused of misbehavior, poor acculturation to the Soviet system, wartime deeds, or dangerous foreign ties. In this context, deportees from Georgia comprised a small percentage of the 2,562,830 “deportees and special settlers” under the control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the summer of 1949.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, the population of Georgia made up just 2 percent of the Soviet population but was proportionally overrepresented in the special settlement system. This imbalance grew over time; Claire Kaiser has calculated that Georgia accounted for 14 percent of postwar deportations.<sup>95</sup>

What can explain these robust national expulsions from Georgia? Decrees ultimately came from Moscow, but expulsion plans were formulated in conversation with republican officials who exerted significant influence over deportation operations and the reshaping of emptied minority settlements. In the case of Georgia, Communist Party documents show that Georgian Kurds, Turks (*turki*), and Khemshins were deported for “national characteristics” (*po natsional'nym priznakam*), but the evolution of migration plans over the summer of 1944 reveals how Georgian officials molded the deportation conversation, as well as the fairly spontaneous way that Kurds were swept into

these plans.<sup>96</sup> In a letter Charkviani and Valerian Bakradze, the head of Georgia's Sovnarkom, sent to Beria in May 1944, they discussed moving the Turkish (*turtskii*) population from the Georgian-Turkish border zone to eastern (i.e., internal) areas of the Georgian republic. Claiming that it would be difficult to find room for these deportees in eastern Georgia, they agreed to do so since there was "no other option." At this point, they declared that Kurdish relocation was unnecessary.<sup>97</sup>

In June, however, Charkviani, Bakradze, and Avksentii Narikievich Rapava, the People's Commissar for State Security in Georgia, reported to Beria that, since there was now an option to resettle people outside of Georgia, it was "also necessary to evict" more Turks (*turki*), 1,030 Kurdish households from the Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, and Adigeni regions, and Kurds and Khemshins from Adjara. No explanation was provided for the deportation of the 1,030 Kurdish households and Turks, but Charkviani et al. framed the Adjara deportations in essentializing language reminiscent of recent deportation orders issued for Chechens, Ingushes, and Balkars in the North Caucasus: the Kurds and Khemshins in Adjara avoided participation in collective farms (*kolkhozes*), their cattle roamed in border regions, and they had been implicated in spying.<sup>98</sup> Archival documents show that, at the same time, the republican leadership was developing plans to resettle Georgians from other areas of Georgia in these soon-to-be-empty borderlands. Some of these settlers would be used to develop the resort network in Borjomi.<sup>99</sup> It is clear that republican officials expanded deportation plans once it was possible to send deportees out of the republic.<sup>100</sup> Both Beria, with his dual power base in Moscow and the Caucasus, and republican leaders such as Charkviani and Bakradze share responsibility for these deportations with Stalin, who signed expulsion orders as chairman of the Council of Ministers.

The Soviet Georgian leadership's enthusiasm for deportations continued after the war. During Operation Volna, they targeted communities outside the geographic areas specified in the deportation order.<sup>101</sup> Then, a few months after Volna, Charkviani wrote to Stalin proposing to deport 4,500 of the 5,600 people in Georgia with a history of Iranian citizenship. Although these deportation orders were again framed in the language of state security, many deportees, recognizing that their expulsion bolstered titular nation-building, considered themselves to be victims of "Georgification."<sup>102</sup> Following these postwar deportations, Greeks, Iranians, "Turks," and others who could somehow be linked to Greece, Iran, and Turkey—the countries linked to the Truman Doctrine—had been cleansed from Georgia.

There is a clear titular nation-building component embedded in these deportations. Georgian resettlement to areas like Abkhazia had been going on for

years, and many of the regions targeted for deportation were demographically dominated by minorities considered unassimilable into the Georgian nation. According to the 1939 census, Georgians made up less than 14 percent of the population in the Adigeni, Aspindza, and Akhalkalaki regions. They were significantly outnumbered locally by “Azerbaijanis” (most Meskhetians later recategorized in the catch-all “Turk” category), at almost 64 percent of the regional population, and Armenians, who made up a little more than 15 percent.<sup>103</sup>

Why is it important to understand how the Georgian leadership—Beria included—“managed” minority regions and communities before, during, and after the war? Charkviani’s intervention on behalf of the Georgian-Ingiloi in Azerbaijan and complaints about Azerbaijani chauvinism must be contextualized as part of this broader story. His proposal to annex Azerbaijan’s Balakan, Qakh, and Zaqatala regions was about more than taking land from Soviet Azerbaijan or offense at minority assimilation there. It was part of a larger process of nation-building enhanced by wartime exigencies and, more important, possibilities. Georgian claims on Azerbaijani territory overlapped with Bagirov’s push to integrate Iranian Azerbaijan with the Azerbaijan SSR, but also with Charkviani, Beria, and Bakradze’s deportation plans for Georgia’s “Turks,” Kurds, and Khemshins; overtures toward Fereydan Georgians in Iran; and Charkviani and Mgeladze’s efforts to “Georgianize” Abkhazia. In other words, many of the things that Charkviani complained about in the Azerbaijani context mirrored his own oppressive treatment of Abkhazians and other minorities in Georgia. After all, who better to protect their “own” people than those who are using similar tactics?

## The Case of Saingilo

As with Nagorno-Karabakh, control over Zaqatala, Qakh, and Balakan was disputed from the very start of the Soviet project. In the late Russian Empire, the region was part of the Zaqatala *okrug*, which was a separate administrative territory bordering the Elizavetpol *guberniia* (governorate), the Tiflis *guberniia*, and Dagestan *oblast’*. After the Russian Revolution, three inchoate states—the Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus based in Temir-Khan-Shura, which is now Buynaksk (Dagestan); the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) centered in Baku; and the Georgian Democratic Republic with its capital in Tiflis, which later became Tbilisi—laid claim to the territory.<sup>104</sup>

The Zaqatala National Council negotiated autonomous provincial status with the ADR in summer 1918, but Baku exerted only nominal control over the region and the local population harbored multiple belongings and self-understandings. Many in the area, including Avars, Laks, and others had long

been oriented toward Dagestan, in part because of the many Dagestani peoples who had migrated to the area but continued to travel back and forth across mountain paths. Others, meanwhile, had co-ethnic bonds and a general alignment with Georgia and Georgians. There is evidence of this, for instance, in a 1921 appeal from the Ingiloi Georgian Organization of the Communist Party to the “workers, peasants, and soldiers of Georgia,” entreating them to abandon their defense of the Georgian Democratic Government and establish the power of the workers and peasants once and for all.<sup>105</sup>

About a week after the Red Army took control of the ADR in late April, the Soviet government signed the Treaty of Moscow with Georgia on May 7, 1920, recognizing Georgia’s sovereignty and establishing peaceful relations. The treaty, signed by Grigorii Illarionovich Uratadze (Georgia) and Lev Mikhailovich Karakhan (Soviet Russia), defined the Zaqatala *okrug* as part of Georgia, but a supplement created five days later—with Baku and Ordzhonikidze’s urging—acknowledged the dispute between Georgia and the new Azerbaijan Soviet Republic over the region and established a joint commission to determine its status.<sup>106</sup> The subsequent period was tumultuous, with both Georgia and Azerbaijan claiming control over the region. Within a month, the Red Army used the excuse of local uprisings to occupy Zaqatala. By the following spring, the Georgian Democratic Republic had been overthrown and Georgia integrated into the Soviet system. Not long after that, a conference was held in Tiflis to regularize the borders between Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia, and on July 5, 1921, the Georgian Socialist Soviet Republic officially “renounced all pretensions to the Zaqatala *okrug*.”<sup>107</sup>

Although the decision was made to adjoin Zaqatala to Azerbaijan rather than Georgia, the region—like so many others in the Soviet Union—was populated by a multiethnic population that did not fit neatly into any one national box or orientation. Its placement in Soviet Azerbaijan did not sit well with many Georgians and Georgian-Ingilois, for example, who continuously agitated for Georgian annexation of the region. Their alignment toward Georgia was in line with decades of Russian imperial ethnographic texts that positioned Saingilo as a historical part of the Georgian Kakheti region and defined Georgians and “Engilos”—Christian and Muslim alike—as part of the same national community.<sup>108</sup> In these texts, Georgian-Ingilois were described as indigenous to the region and juxtaposed with other nationalities that were often portrayed as interlopers who had historically abused them. Further, it was implied that these “late arrivals” had less right to the territory.

In 1870, for instance, the ethnographer Aleksandr Ivanovich von Plotto explained that, when the Zaqatala *okrug* formed the eastern edge of the Kakhetian kingdom, Georgians made up the dominant population but had

been joined by Mugals (Mongols) during the Timurid-era “great migration of peoples” and Lezgins who arrived from Dagestan to take advantage of Shah Abbas’s attack on Kakhetia in the seventeenth century. According to von Plotto, local Georgians, now known as “ingelo” because of their history of Islamic conversion used the Georgian language at home and were increasingly exposed to Christianity by missionaries.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, Russian incorporation of the region enabled intensive Christian missionary work that returned many Georgian-Ingilois to the Christian faith in the late nineteenth century.<sup>110</sup>

These characterizations of Georgian-Ingilois and the region persisted after Zaqatala was adjoined to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1921. Ethnographic and political reports continued to emphasize Georgian-Ingiloi “Georgianness,” providing additional fodder for Georgians and Georgian-Ingilois aggrieved by Azerbaijan’s claims to the region. In 1924, for example, the ethnographer and Caucasus specialist Grigorii Filippovich Chursin determined that the estimated 15,000 Ingiloi in the Aliabad, Qakh, and Jar-Mukhakh districts of the Zaqatala region were part of the Kartvelian ethnographic group. Chursin further explained that they knew the Azerbaijani dialect or language (*azerbaidzhanskoe narechie*) for intertribal communication, but their native language was of Georgian extraction.<sup>111</sup> An Azerbaijani state report from the mid-1920s, meanwhile, disaggregated the community into two groups: (1) “ingiloitsy (*engiolttsy*)” Georgian Muslims in the Zaqatala region, and (2) “gruziny (*kakhetichnskie*)” (*sic*) in Zaqatala and Baku, but also categorized both the Muslim Ingilois and Christian Georgians as “*Kartavel'tsy*,” or Georgians (Kartvelians is the basis for the Georgian word for Georgia, Sakartvelo).<sup>112</sup>

Although the divide between Christian and Muslim Georgian-Ingilois is frequently elided in these texts by an emphasis on their shared Georgianness, the differing religious identifications are key to understanding how the population has been contested, claimed, and policed by competing actors (local and otherwise) seeking to mobilize cultural and political resources and power. Not unlike in Kemalist Turkey, from Baku’s perspective the most meaningful marker of identity in this community was often religion rather than nationality. Differentiated national policies and practices applied to Christian and Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi settlements demonstrate that Azerbaijani officials considered Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi to be more assimilable than their Christian Georgian-Ingiloi neighbors and proceeded from this assumption.<sup>113</sup>

In this regard, the experience of Christian Georgian-Ingilois in Qakh closely resembled that of titular diasporas in the Soviet Union, like the Armenians in Azerbaijan. In the Soviet period, Christian Georgian-Ingilois were counted as Georgian in censuses and registered as such in their passports. Compared to their Muslim counterparts, they had fairly consistent access to Georgian-

language schools, kolkhozes, and cultural resources in Azerbaijan's Qakh region. Nonetheless, Azerbaijani nation-building practices carried out in Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi communities meant that Christians also worried that their Georgian identification and cultural resources were at risk.<sup>114</sup>

This was for good reason. Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi in Soviet Azerbaijan experienced significant pressure to identify as part of the titular Azerbaijani nation. Although most ethnographers continued to categorize Christian Georgian-Ingiloi as Georgian, Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi at best were considered an ethnographic group of the Georgian nation and registered as Azerbaijani in Soviet passports and censuses. They were also more integrated into Azerbaijani educational and political spheres than their Christian counterparts. Georgian-language schools and sectors in Muslim communities opened later than in Christian settlements and often lasted for only a few years before being transformed back into the Azerbaijani language. In this regard, Azerbaijani authorities treated Muslim Georgian-Ingiloi much as they did other nontitular peoples like Talyshes. Thus, although the Saingilo dispute was fed by Georgian accusations of discrimination against all Georgian-Ingiloi in Azerbaijan, the most pitched identity battles centered on the orientation of Muslim villages, including Aliabad (Əliabad), Yengiyan, and Mosul in Zaqatala region, İtitala in Balakan region, and Zayam (Zəyəm), Qoraghan (Qorağan), and Tasmalı in Qakh.

The first Georgian-language schools were opened in Christian communities in Qakh after Sovietization in 1920, but *korenizatsiia* generally came late to area minorities. It was only in 1937 that an Azerbaijani Narkompros decree ordered regional executive committees to switch local schools and governmental affairs from Azerbaijani to the "native language of ingiloi" in Qakh, Balakan, and Zaqatala.<sup>115</sup> Due to the titular status of Georgians in neighboring Georgia, Georgian-language schools survived the purge of native-language schooling at the close of the 1930s. Over the next couple of years, the Georgian-language educational network even expanded from Qakh into Zaqatala and Balakan.<sup>116</sup> At some point in 1943, however, Georgian-language schools in Muslim communities like Zayam, Tasmalı, and İtitala were switched back to Azerbaijani-language instruction, prompting protests from some residents.

The school closures motivated Qakh-born, Tbilisi-based academic Georgii Gamkharashvili to intensify his activism for Georgian-Ingiloi national rights in Azerbaijan. Over the course of the 1940s, he established a relationship with Charkviani, but in a letter sent to Charkviani and Bakradze in 1943, he still found it necessary to validate his claims by referencing his history of agitation for Georgian-Ingiloi rights and his acquaintanceship with Comrade S. Khoshtaria.<sup>117</sup> This connection would prove key, as it was Khoshtaria who appears to have brought the letter to Charkviani's desk. In this letter, Gamkharashvili argued

that Georgian-language school closures in Marsan, İtitala, Aliabad, and other Muslim villages proved that republic officials were trying to “Tiurkify” (“*tiurki-fitsiruetsia*”) Georgian-Ingiloi: “As in the past with the mullahs, now some employees of AzNarkompros exaggerate the question of Georgian-Muslim belonging to Tiurks and argue that there is no reason why Georgian schools should exist.” He closed by offering to supply Charkviani with informational reports about Saingilo’s ethnography, history, economy, and culture that would explain why the region belonged to Georgia and the injustice of Azerbaijani control there. Gamkharashvili clearly considered Saingilo to be a natural part of the Georgian SSR and believed that all Georgian-Ingiloi—regardless of religious orientation—were part of the Georgian nation.<sup>118</sup>

By 1944, Gamkharashvili and another Tbilisi-based academic from Qakh, Archil Dzhnashvili, had established a relationship with Soviet leaders in both Moscow and Tbilisi. Indeed, in addition to continuously petitioning Georgian and Azerbaijani officials, Gamkharashvili traveled to Moscow several times to try to meet with Stalin, succeeding on at least one occasion.<sup>119</sup> Gamkharashvili and Dzhnashvili’s letters also reveal an intensified level of ease and engagement over time. As their familiarity with the leadership grew and reports about Georgian claims to Turkish territories spread in the newspapers, their writing remained deferential but their demands expanded. They eventually started submitting lengthy memorandums about Saingilo to the Georgian Communist Party.<sup>120</sup> While they were still interested in ending national discrimination against Georgian-Ingiloi in Azerbaijan, they also started requesting the transfer of the region from Azerbaijan to Georgia. As Gamkharashvili put it, only then would the population truly reap the benefits and justice of Stalin’s socialism.<sup>121</sup> By 1946—after Charkviani’s annexation overture—Gamkharashvili was opening and closing his letters with statements supporting the Georgian annexation of Saingilo. In one letter to Stalin, for instance, he wrote that, in order “to eradicate abnormalities [mentioned earlier in the letter], the Qakh, Zaqatala, and Balakan regions must immediately be transferred to the Georgian SSR.”<sup>122</sup>

In March 1944, objections to the Georgian-Ingiloi situation also reached Charkviani from the Georgian NKVD after Major Isashvili, head of NKVD operations in Akhaltsikhe, a major site of Meskhetian Turk deportation a few months later, reported on a recent trip home to Qakh. Over several pages, Isashvili described Georgian-Ingiloi’s marginalization in Azerbaijan. Employing dramatic anecdotes about their alienation from rich kolkhoz lands, Azeri men assaulting Georgian-Ingiloi female kolkhozniks, Azeri calling Georgian-Ingiloi degrading names, Azerbaijan’s educational authorities exhorting “Ingiloi-Azerbaijanis” to study in Azerbaijani because they are Muslim, and Georgian-Ingiloi lacking telephones, lights, radios, and

other resources, Isashvili built a case to prove the oppression of Georgian-Ingiloi in Azerbaijan.<sup>123</sup>

In a sign that Georgian-Ingiloi petitions and complaints were hitting the right desks, in the spring of 1944 Stalin instructed Charkviani and Bagirov to arrange a fact-finding trip to Qakh, Balakan, and Zaqatala. In their post-trip report to Stalin, they acknowledged that local officials, “motivated, allegedly, by the wishes of the population, and also by inadequate numbers of Georgian teachers in connection with mobilization for the army, incorrectly transferred instruction in schools from Georgian to the Azerbaijani language” in Aliabad, İtitala, and Mosul during the war. They further agreed that, starting with the 1944–1945 school year, all schools in Ingiloi villages would be renovated, switched to the Georgian language, and provided appropriate instructional resources and qualified teachers.<sup>124</sup> Charkviani also promised to enroll forty Ingiloi students in Tbilisi higher education institutions every year, further strengthening Georgian-Ingiloi ties to the Georgian republic.<sup>125</sup> This agreement remained the status quo until 1954, when, as is discussed in chapter 3, Georgian schools were closed once again in Georgian-Ingiloi Muslim communities.

The “Saingilo expedition” represented a remarkable case of interrepublican interference. Officials from Soviet Azerbaijan were understandably frustrated, but Georgians were also discontented. Drafts of the report provide some insight into their differing interests, conclusions, and motivations. Charkviani, for example, edited a draft to emphasize that Georgian schools were incorrectly switched to the Azerbaijani language during the war and to downplay excuses for the closures. He also inflated the number of Georgian-Ingilois in Azerbaijan from 8,147 to 9,000 and emphasized that Ingilois are Georgians: the opening line of Bagirov’s draft discussed schools “in Ingiloi villages,” but Charkviani’s version addressed schools in “Georgian (Ingiloi) villages.”<sup>126</sup>

Charkviani also bitterly complained to Beria—his partner in reshaping Georgia’s demographics—about the trip and his displeasure with his Azerbaijani counterparts. He explained that he followed instructions and came to an agreement with Bagirov, but “everything that was written in complaint letters about national education in Saingilo was completely proven. From 17 schools functioning in 1937 (3 of them existing since 1920), only 7 are left.” He continued, “It is significant to note that Georgian schools were liquidated in all Mohammedan Ingilo villages, although the latter speak Georgian.”<sup>127</sup> Although the investigatory report from Georgian and Azerbaijani education officials, including Ibragimov as Azerbaijani Commissar of Enlightenment, claimed that school closures were implemented without approval from Baku,<sup>128</sup> Charkviani informed Beria that the closures could not have happened without “silent agreement and support from the center, at least from the national

enlightenment organs. Teachers at Azerbaijani schools and local workers carry out intense propaganda in favor of Azerbaijanization [*azerbaidzhanizatsiia*] among Muslim-Georgians; they hammer into their heads that they are ‘Tatars’ and not Georgians.”<sup>129</sup>

The 1944 agreement formalized Georgian involvement in educational, cultural, and economic affairs in Qakh, Zaqatala, and Balakan, but reports from Georgian workers indicate that local officials were more likely to greet them with hostility rather than brotherly Soviet warmth. In December 1945, an artistic brigade from Georgia attempted to organize twelve free concerts in the region but only gave six concerts in Zaqatala, Qakh, and Balakan before local officials disrupted their shows, claiming they lacked authorization from Azerbaijan’s Sovnarkom.<sup>130</sup> Grigorii Kutubidze, a teacher from Georgia who taught in Qakh and edited a Georgian-language newspaper there from 1944 to 1946, similarly complained to Charkviani about local authorities obstructing his work. Reiterating many of Gamkharashvili and Isashvili’s points about discrimination against Georgian-Ingilois, Kutubidze also criticized Lezgin and Mugal mistreatment of Georgian-Ingilois. If we take Kutubidze’s report at face value, it would appear that Georgian-Ingilois (whom he alternately refers to as “Georgian-Muslims” and “Georgians”) were under assault from all sides in this “ancient corner” of Georgia.<sup>131</sup>

Officials in Azerbaijan were similarly frustrated. In a draft Sovmin and party decree from August 1946 about work among Georgian-Ingilois, they complained about Georgian SSR interference in the three regions.<sup>132</sup> The section was ultimately crossed out, but they were less circumspect elsewhere. In multiple MVD and party reports, and in at least one Azerbaijan Communist Party bureau meeting, Baku officials denounced the negative influence that Georgians were having on the local “Ingilo” population, blaming these outsiders for fostering a rise in nationalism within the republic.<sup>133</sup> They also went on the attack, showing their Georgian colleagues that two could play at this game. In December 1947, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Enlightenment sent a group of inspectors, including Deputy Minister D. A. Aleskerov, to Georgia to investigate Georgia’s many Azerbaijani-language schools. Returning with a report full of instructional and material shortcomings and insufficiencies, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Enlightenment crafted a decree outlining Azerbaijani assistance plans for Azerbaijani schools in Georgia and forwarded it to Georgia’s Minister of Education.<sup>134</sup>

Why did Charkviani get involved in Saingilo and stoke tensions with his neighboring republic? His pitch for Georgian-Ingiloi rights and attempt to expand Georgia’s footprint complemented other efforts he was making in Abkhazia

and the Georgian-Turkish borderlands, but nationalizing elites were not the only political actors who recognized local political opportunities in Soviet territorial pretensions abroad. Public discussions of Southern Azerbaijan and ancient Armenian and Georgian lands in Turkey encouraged everyday people to take up these discourses and express their own nation-building desires to republic leaders like Bagirov, Arutiunov, and Charkviani. The inspiration could work both ways: Gamkharashvili was encouraged by Stalin and Charkviani's engagement with Saingilo, but Charkviani also drew inspiration from Gamkharashvili's activism, describing him as having "worked all his life to have his native region returned to Georgia" and crediting him with inspiring Stalin to order Charkviani and Bagirov to meet in Saingilo and devise a plan for its Georgian schools.<sup>135</sup>

Further, while Azerbaijani officials blamed Georgia for a perceived rise in nationalism among Georgian-Ingilois, myriad forces were in play. World War II was incredibly destructive for the Soviet Union, but it was also productive in that it created opportunities—good and bad—for republican elites across the Soviet Union to advance the nationalizing, consolidating, and modernizing trends already underway when the war started. In the South Caucasus, Stalin's geopolitical maneuvers in Iran and Turkey emboldened regional leaders on the national front and created opportunities for them to renew land claims, as seen in Bagirov's power play in Iran, Arutiunov's pretensions toward Nagorno-Karabakh, and Charkviani's push to annex Qakh, Balakan, and Zaqatala. Indeed, the entanglement of Azeris, Armenians, Kurds, Shahsevans, Georgians, Khemshins, Greeks, Meskhetian Turks, and others in the Kremlin's interventions in Iran and Turkey paint a picture of a regional world that transcended the political borders dividing the Soviet Caucasus from its international neighbors. It also documents a circularity of influence wherein developments in one place inevitably affected others and the fungibility of wartime borders legitimized not only claims against foreign countries but against Soviet brothers and sisters as well.

Moving into the post-Stalinist period, the range of possibilities continued to evolve. Extreme tools of nationality politics such as mass deportations lost favor as the liberalizing tendencies of de-Stalinization generated new political avenues and sociopolitical behaviors. Despite these changes, the formative wartime period continued to shape South Caucasus political elites and national activists as they worked toward consolidating their nations and republics. Tactics and discourses evolved and expanded, but experiences were not forgotten.