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# Contested Frontiers: Borders and Border Spaces in the South Caucasus from the Second Half of the 19th Century to the 1920s

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*A closer look at the 19th century ethnographic maps of the Caucasus reveals the demographic diversity of the region at the crossroads of three empires: the Persian, the Ottoman, and the Russian. To consolidate their power in this peripheral region, these empires, and later the Soviet authorities, experimented with various scenarios of resettlement, making the region an imperial "laboratory" with massive border shifts. This article discusses the processes of border development in the South Caucasus, beginning with the integration of this region into the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century and continuing until Sovietization in the early 1920s. During this period, the borders in this region were particularly characterized by constant discourses, territorial claims, identity struggles, and ethnic divisions. The article considers the emergence and function of borders and border spaces from the perspective of their temporal evolution and analyses their mutability over time in an era marked by wars, revolutions, conflicts, and political upheavals. The aim is to provide a better understanding of why borders, whose meaning had diminished almost to insignificance during the Soviet period, became subjects of conflict again, turning them into sites of unpredictable aggression.*

Keywords: Armenia; Azerbaijan; war; contested borders; conflict; territoriality.

## Introduction

In September 2020, after years of recurring border conflicts, Azerbaijan launched a massive attack on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. This violent war lasted 44 days, radically changing not only the geopolitical situation in the region but also the lives of the Armenian population in this area.[1] The November 10, 2020 ceasefire agreement did not bring the kind of stability necessary for lasting peace. In question were not only fundamental disagreements over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and its Armenian population, but also the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Violence of varying intensity

continued to occur as Azerbaijan attempted to expand its military success against Armenia by securing control over important strategic hills and several localities along the borderline. As a result, the entire border area became a highly insecure and hostile place for the local Armenian population.

In September 2022, another attack followed, this time on the Republic of Armenia, during which the Azerbaijani army penetrated up to eight kilometers into Armenian territory, forcing the inhabitants near the border areas

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to flee. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev justified the invasion by professing the absence of delimited borders between the two states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In a speech delivered shortly thereafter, he emphasized the need for a new border demarcation, while making immediate claims to certain territories along the border. As evidence, he referred to historical maps: "[w]e have collected all the maps. [...] including those from the 19th century, the 20th century and even earlier, and those maps clearly show who is sitting on which land" (Caucasus Watch 2022). In this statement, the reference to maps from earlier times implied a continuity of "historically established rights" to certain territories along the Armenian–Azerbaijani border, whose alleged historical affiliation was being used as an argument during negotiations for the upcoming border demarcation.

Meanwhile, a closer look at the eventful history of the South Caucasian region shows how unsustainable such assertions are, given the extreme historical mutability of interregional borders—a factor often overlooked in political argumentation. Imperial conquests, disintegration of empires, and the formation of nation-states had turned these borders into multi-layered constructions that have formed, shifted, disappeared, and reappeared over time. These processes were reflected in the memories of the people, who were repeatedly confronted with border changes in their everyday lives, making further research on borders in this region necessary. However, when trying to trace the spatial and temporal dynamics of borders in the South Caucasus, various methodological challenges arise, due especially to the fact that we are dealing with an extremely ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous region, in which national or territorial conflicts have been fought out for centuries.

The Caucasian region, which stretches between the Caspian and Black Seas and is marked by the nearly 1,200-kilometer-long Caucasus Mountains, has been contested by various great powers for centuries (Hunter 2006; O'Loughlin et al. 2007; Saparov 2015). These conquests have often been accompanied by forced migration and expulsion,[2] which have repeatedly changed the demographic composition of the region and shaped the transformation processes of interregional/interethnic borders and their perception. After incorporation into the Tsarist Empire, a relatively long period of political stability during the 19th century ensured the region's economic development. The building of infrastructure, the emergence of transport networks and postal routes, the construction of railroads, and the subsequent transformation of cities into vibrant economic centres made it easier to overcome territorial and temporal barriers. This not only changed existing notions of distance between places and thus the perception of time, but also led to a new understanding of state and intraregional borders.

The current border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which became an international frontier after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, was predominantly created in the 1920s, during the first decade of Soviet rule. Similar to other parts of the multi-ethnic Caucasus, this border bore little correspondence to the ethnic distribution of the population, so that entire settlements along the borderline remained highly contested, partly on a practical level—for instance, for the use of natural resources—and partly on a more discursive level. The administrative boundary lines established during the Soviet period either separated these places from each other or divided them in such a way that entire localities were surrounded by the territory of the other state. The results were persistent problems in the border regions and permanent border shifts that lasted until the 1930s. After a latent phase continuing until the collapse of the Soviet Union, border conflicts re-emerged with renewed force and are extant today.

In order to capture this highly ambivalent development of borders, this article analyses the transformation processes of border areas in the South Caucasus in the context of the expansion and collapse of larger political systems and against the backdrop of violent conflicts. It focuses on the process of creating political and administrative borders—either through the integration policies of the Tsarist Empire and later the Soviet authorities, or through specific social practices and internal integration—as well as on the transformation of those borders over time. In this regard, questions arise as to what extent contemporaneous actors made borders and border areas from previous historical periods the subject of their actions, in what ways the respective national projects reflected the interpretative space-time dimensions of borders, and how these projects expressed different perceptions of nationhood and territoriality. At the end of World War I, when visions about an independent state of different nationalities within the crumbling Tsarist Empire took on more concrete form, ideas about territorial orders from earlier times were resurrected, thus underpinning the respective concepts of territoriality. The article focuses on the evolution of spatial systems and their borders, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the contested border constructions between Armenia and Azerbaijan and their development over time. One approach to do so is the heuristic concept of so-called phantom borders, which was originally conceived to describe the "re-emergence" of old spatial orders that can continue to have a space-shaping effect long after their disappearance (von Hirschhausen 2015, 18). The multidisciplinary and multi-perspective approaches of the concept are intended to provide a better explanation for the theory of the "social production of space". Phantom borders and spaces are then understood "as the result of social action, as a place of discursive mediation, as the object and result of power relations", allowing to explain the persistence of

historical and new spatial concepts and practices (Esch & von Hirschhausen 2017, 18).

While phantom borders describe territoriality, the concept of temporality reveals the constantly changing nature of borders that are not "fixed and stable objects" (Pfoser 2022, 567), but subject to a transformation process that takes place over time. This perspective emphasises the fact that "political actors, ideas, processes, policies, and institutions do not move at the same pace", making the lack of synchronicity in the changes that are constantly occurring in relation to how borders function a central issue of temporality (Little 2015, 432). In this context, the article aims to rethink borders and border spaces in the highly contested South Caucasus region in order to conceptualise not only spatial ideas and how they disappear and reappear over time, but also the scope of action and the role that different actors play in this process. With the analytical integration of temporality as a central component of border studies as well as the concept of phantom borders in research on the Armenian–Azerbaijani border, more comprehensive perspectives come into focus, replacing the more linear perception of borders. The starting point is the idea that the dynamics of border development and consolidation, and thus the emergence of new border landscapes, result from the interplay of state ideology and politics on the one hand and the social practices of people living in border areas on the other, while also being subject to historical conditions.

## A Theoretical View of the Armenian–Azerbaijani Border

One could reasonably argue that most studies dealing with borders in the South Caucasian region address the issue against the background of either existing ethno-national or territorial conflicts and/or the processes of nation- and state-building, focusing on state policies or the scope of action of local actors, but only rarely on border construction as an ongoing process (Tokluoglu 2011; Babajew et al. 2014; Balayev 2015; Bournoutian 2018). A further recurring motif in border studies of the Caucasian region is violence in interethnic relations and its impact on border changes (Mammadova 2016). Memories of violence were often historical reference points that determined social perceptions of both interstate and intraregional borders. While the external borders of the empire were administrative lines drawn by state power on the basis of political decisions, intraregional borders within which people developed different perceptions of space and time could also be socially defined. In this respect, not only territorial but also temporal perceptions of borders differed considerably, as different ethnic groups used different past events as reference points. Armenians, for example, whose historical homeland stretched across three empires—Persian, Ottoman, and Russian—had to deal with constant border conflicts and territorial reorganizations throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. From the second half of the 19th century, the Armenian intellectual elite, especially in Russia and Turkey, increasingly began to discuss the idea of territory with respect to a divided homeland. In literature, this manifested itself in the replacement of the terms "Turkish" and "Russian" Armenia with "Western" and "Eastern" Armenia (Ter-Matevosyan 2023, 2). Around the turn of the century, in the course of identity formation processes, conceptions of homeland and territory also emerged among Caucasian Muslims. Although these conceptions of space and time could hardly have been more contradictory or competing, they were fundamental to the territorial ideas developed by different sides. The research on the history of the Southern Caucasus has taken these processes into account to capture the changing nature of boundaries, however, in most cases the goal has been to construct a continuity between certain events of the past and present based on rough historical analogies. As a result, arbitrarily chosen snapshots of border transformations miss the larger historical context, as the analysis tends to focus on political changes in a particular time period, which are then usually presented in a linear fashion. In addition, parallel perspectives of imperial and national history dominate research, while studies that consider boundary-making processes in the context of a broad, multi-layered, and interconnected space, or in light of larger historical dynamics arising from interactions and interdependencies, remain rather underrepresented.

These shortcomings aside, numerous studies on borders and borderlands in the South Caucasian region have emerged in recent decades (Coppieters 1996; Galichian 2012; Forestier-Peyrat 2015; Saparov 2015; Palonkorpi 2015; Saparov 2016). Many of these studies focus on the meaning of borders in relation to issues such as inclusion and exclusion, explain how individual communities defined each other in order to constitute their own national identities, or address more practical questions of border-making processes. Other studies dealing with the Caucasian region as part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union integrate the processes of border demarcation with the administrative policies of the centre, or with the formation of nation-states. In doing so, relations between the state and its regions are often viewed from a top-down perspective in which all power emanates from the "centre". Overcoming this state-centric approach requires a reconsideration that goes beyond the normative understanding of borders as traditional physical dividing lines and conceptualizes them as the result of social, cultural, and political processes that take place over time. Therefore, a more detailed analysis at the socio-cultural, political, and administrative levels is needed to examine the impact of the common imperial heritage in the three South Caucasian republics and their often similar, yet different, paths to nation-building on the ruins of the Tsarist Empire after 1917.

Despite the obvious fact that borders are highly contingent entities and subject to continuous transformation over time, the spatial and territorial understanding of borders dominates political and even academic discourse, while the temporal dimension is often marginalised. With regard to the socially and politically established narratives of assumed historical continuity of borders, it can be argued that temporality in border studies is particularly difficult to reconcile with subjective, interpretative and aggressive political articulation, especially in times of ongoing conflict. This is especially true for the border transformation processes between Armenia and Azerbaijan over time and represents one of the most complex methodological challenges of border studies in this region. The argument that borders are by no means static and inert despite their physical location at a given point in time (Little 2015, 436) therefore somewhat contradicts national narratives that tend to focus attention on the place of a border's physical location within a certain time frame. This often implies a continuity that, in most cases, did not exist during the assumed period. So instead of the normative understanding of borders as dividing lines, it seems to be more rewarding to focus on the pace, nature, and effects of changes over time associated with different border practices.

In contrasting the respective national projects developed among Armenians and Caucasian Muslims, this article further builds on Anderson and O'Dowd's argument that borders and borderlands have competing and contradictory meanings that highlight the contingent nature of borders, given the complexity of spatial and temporal changes (1999). Consequently, the meaning of borders derives from territoriality as a general organizing principle of political and social life, which, however, changes over time, with state borders and border regions being reconstituted or renegotiated (ibid.). Changes in the functions and meanings of borders, which are ambiguous and contradictory anyway, are a result of this process. In order to classify these border processes in their spatial and temporal dimensions, it is necessary to take into account local specificities, whether political, economic, social, or cultural. The material and symbolic meaning of borders and their general theoretical and historical contextualization is crucial here, as the temporality of borders and their spatiality often intersect in ways that make it impossible to consider one without the other. Applied to the South Caucasus region, it can be stated that the passing of time and the changes occurring during this period have been viewed in a highly subjective manner, leading to irreconcilable political disputes and even violent conflicts.

Throughout the 19th century, the people of the South Caucasus were constantly confronted with changing internal and external borders. In the course of the dissolution of the Tsarist Empire and after the First World War, territorial reorganisations took place within a short period of time, which gave the administrative units from the time of the Tsarist Empire a new political significance. By placing the interaction between space, territoriality and temporality at the centre of research, the controversial political demarcations and territorial divisions of historical space can be better explained.

## The Caucasus as Part of the Russian Empire: A Top-Down Definition of Borders

Prior to Russian rule over the South Caucasus in the early 19th century, the region was divided between the Ottoman and Persian Empires and consisted of a patchwork of several semi-independent and competing khanates and principalities. The administrative division of the region was based on the principle of individual political entities that typically comprised areas with an ethnically diverse population (Tsutsiev 2014, 4). The physical boundaries between localities with Christian and Muslim populations were at times very fluid and could be shifted or even abolished by wars, expulsions, and the arbitrariness of political rulers.

After the annexation of the South Caucasus by the Tsarist Empire, this form of division was replaced by a new administrative system that followed the logic of the region's political and cultural integration, as well as



**Figure 1. Russia's territorial gains after the two Russo-Persian Wars in 1804–13 and 1826–28**. Source: Wikipedia (public domain), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russo-Persian_Wars#/media/File:Gulistan-Treaty.jpg.

its economic exploitation. The external borders were established following the two Russo–Persian (1804–13 and 1826–28) and the Russo–Turkish (1828–29) wars, making the Caspian and Black Seas, as well as the Araks and Kura rivers, natural barriers protecting the empire's southern borders from Persian and Ottoman attacks. Both external and interregional borders were affected, within a relatively short period of time, by various changes and shifts which continued even after the complete conquest of the Caucasus by the Tsarist Empire in the following decades.

With the conquest of the South Caucasus, Russia acquired an ethnically extremely heterogeneous region whose administration proved relentlessly challenging. The implementation of a centralized and unified form of government was opposed by the local autonomies, whose gradual elimination was seen as a prerequisite for the region's integration into the Russian Empire. This process was carried out in several stages. Immediately after the conquest of the region, five administrative units—the Georgian, Caspian, Imeretian, and Armenian provinces, and the Muslim Military District—were created more or less according to ethno-religious principles (Bournoutian 2018, 7). In 1844, the establishment of the Caucasian Viceroyalty followed, accompanied by an administrative reorganization. By 1849, the provinces of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Shemakha, Derbent, and Erevan had been created, and the governorate of Elizavetpol followed in 1868 (Saparov 2015, 22).

Essentially, the administrative policy of the Tsarist Empire contributed to the creation of ethnic spaces, while simultaneously aiming to prevent the emergence of the hegemony of a single strong ethnic group in a given area. As a result of this policy, the newly created border areas were shaped by ethnic ties, language, and religious affiliation in ways that led to deteriorating ethno-demographic problems. Whether this policy was aimed at deliberate Russification or whether it was an administrative facilitation are both possibilities that Saparov leaves open. One thing he considers certain, however, is that the elimination of the associative historical names of the provinces undermined the local population's affiliation with the former semi-autonomous principalities and thus facilitated the region's assimilation into the Russian Empire (Saparov 2015, 23). Whatever the case, the administrative policy of the Tsarist Empire was crucial for the subsequent border demarcation processes after the collapse of the Russian Empire, in the formation phase of the first independent republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and in the 1920s, the early years of the Soviet Union. Ideas about earlier administrative divisions, such as the Muslim khanates at the beginning of the 19th century, or the—albeit short-lived—Armenian province, repeatedly emerged as conceptual approaches in various national projects in the southern Caucasus after the collapse of the Tsarist Empire. The various territorial ideas in these projects were "simultaneously imagined (produced

and passed on discursively), experienced (perceived as experience and updated in practice by the actors), and designed (by territorialization processes)" (von Hirschhausen 2019, 377), thus fulfilling the fundamental concepts of spatial imagination, spatial experience, and spatial design underlying the concept of phantom borders.

The new administrative division of the Caucasus allowed for more efficient management of the region, leading to economic benefits and a relatively long period of political stability and economic integration. This period was marked by fundamental modernization efforts, accompanied by reforms in the political, social, and economic spheres, and the development of transport networks—including the construction of new roads, water supplies, the first railroad tunnel through the Surami Mountains (the construction of which was completed in 1890), and the first railroad lines and fuel pipelines. However, the economic boom was marked by a serious deficiency of qualified specialists, which opened the gates for young people from the Caucasus to attend Russian and European universities. Under the influence of a highly educated elite, nation-building processes began during the 19th century, first among Armenians and Georgians and, at the turn of the century, among Caucasian Muslims, leading to growing political participation and demands for civil rights, social justice, and equality.

An integral part of these processes was the development of respective national projects, directed at defining identities associated with particular territories. The rediscovery and reinterpretation of the historical past beyond imperial hegemony meant not only a redefinition of a national self-image based on language, writing, religion, etc., but also a reordering of territorial and cultural boundaries. In this process,



**Figure 2. The Surami Pass and Tunnel, end of the 19th century**. Source: Wikimedia (public domain). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barkanov._Surami_Pass.jpg.

clear identity ascriptions emerged, with an increasingly explicit distinction between what was described as homeland and what had to be excluded as "foreign". As Ronald Suny stated, the stories people were telling about themselves led to discussions about boundaries, about who belongs to the group and who is out, "where the 'homeland' begins and where it ends, what the 'true' history of the nation is" (2000, 145). This bottom-up understanding of space, shaped by memories and narratives, often contradicted political-administrative directives from above, especially when people in the affected border areas were confronted with border transformation processes. For the respective national movements and the processes of state formation, the very notion of "homeland" within a defined territory was the most crucial factor, based as it was on memories of the region's centuries-long semi-autonomous status on the edge of different empires (Saparov 2015, 23). From this narrative grew the idea and legitimacy for the respective national territories, with the claim that the new national borders should include as completely as possible the territories that were considered as historically integral parts of each state.

Along with historically based arguments about the boundaries of the "homeland", another factor that dominated the respective border perceptions was memories of excessive violence. The events at the beginning of the 20th century, which were closely linked to the idea of how the borders between these two states developed, were important reference points for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Social and ethnic tensions on the eve of the First Russian Revolution led to a wave of mass protests that soon erupted into bloody clashes (ibid., 34). Interethnic conflicts between Armenians and Caucasian Muslims first appeared in Baku in 1905, escalating in the following year into reciprocal massacres that shook the entire region. It was not until a year later that the tsarist security apparatus managed to regain control of the situation. In the years that followed, Russian influence, which had dominated political, social, and economic life in the Caucasus for more than a century, began to diminish, while interethnic tensions intensified amid the emergence of competing political spaces. The ideas held by the tsarist authorities and local actors about the political future of the region began to diverge, leading to the emergence of radically opposing projects, up to and including growing demands for autonomy and self-determination, which ultimately challenged both the interregional and the external borders of the empire. The violent clashes in the early 20th century marked the beginning of national-territorial claims between Armenians and Caucasian Muslims and were to act as an important mobilizing force for national movements on both sides in the ensuing decades. Important for the understanding of the following events is the fact that the respective conceptions of territoriality and borders from this point on were additionally shaped by the cultivation of enemy images, and notions of recurring violence, as well as by the perception of borders as insecure and hostile places.

## Borders in the Respective National Projects: A Bottom-Up Definition

The Armenian national project developed in the Russian and Ottoman empires under different political and social conditions. In the second half of the 19th century, the emerging Armenian intelligentsia, who had enjoyed an excellent education at European and Russian universities, were mainly concerned with issues around the political liberation of Armenians. The members of this national elite were significantly influenced by the romantic nationalism that took root in Europe during the 19th century. The idea of national emancipation was therefore initially rooted among Armenians in Europe, but soon spread across both the Russian and the Ottoman empires. Intellectual debates began to focus increasingly on national consolidation, including the liberation of Turkish Armenians. The idea was linked to the struggle for independence of the "smaller nations" in the Balkans (Hroch 1968), with the "Macedonian movement" against Ottoman rule in particular being, for Armenians, an example par excellence.

The first Armenian political party, named "Armenakan", was founded in 1885 in Van, Turkey, under the de facto leadership of publicist Mkrtich Avetisian (also known as Mkrtich T'erlemezian, 1864–1896). Avetisian was a student of the pedagogue and publicist Mkrtich P'ortugalian (1848–1921), who was actively involved in the Armenian national movement in Van. In 1885, after his arrest, P'ortugalian left Turkey and settled in Marseille, where he founded the journal "Armenia", the ideological mouthpiece of the Armenakan party. Barely two years later, in 1887, the Armenian Social Democratic Party "Hnchakian" was founded in Geneva around the journal *Hnchak* (The Bell), followed by the Hay Heghap'okhakan Dashnaktsut'iun (Armenian Revolutionary Confederation, hereafter "Dashnaktsut'iun") party, founded in Tbilisi in 1890. All three parties originally promoted the idea of autonomy rights for Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and fundamental reforms in the areas inhabited by Armenians. At this stage, the idea of national emancipation was associated by the Armenian political elite with the notion of an "ethno-cultural Armenian community beyond any temporal and spatial boundaries" and with few concrete claims to a specific territory (Broers 2019, 67).

However, the further development of national identity gave the Armenian national movement a new sense of territoriality, which led to a "new homeland-based nationalism" (ibid.). The idea of the political liberation of Armenians from Ottoman rule through armed struggle soon developed into a concept of an independent nation-state on a defined territory. At the root, these aspirations for political independence were different

ideas about the borders of the Armenian state to be founded. Yet the development of the Armenian national movement in the Russian and Ottoman empires began to diverge at a certain point. The First Russian Revolution was not only accompanied by political repression, but also brought about enormous social polarization. While Armenians in the Russian Empire were under the influence of the nationalist ideas of the Dashnaktsut'iun party, but also of the Russian social democratic movement, Armenians in the Ottoman Empire did not share the sympathies for the socialist ideas held by their compatriots in the Caucasus. As a result, while discussing the restoration of historical Armenia, the two parts of Armenian society developed different outlooks on Armenia's political future; at the same time, the views of Armenian nationalists and socialists also began to diverge considerably. This competition between nationalist and social democratic ideas was not an unusual development and could also be observed among other nations within the Russian Empire. The most significant conflict point consisted of the fundamental differences in hopes for the nation's future, either as an independent nation within the borders of an autonomous state, or as part of a large "socialist family" alongside the "big brother", Russia.

The situation of Armenians changed dramatically after the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire and carried out in the shadow of World War I, which literally uprooted Armenians (Broers 2019, 68). This led to an exodus of some 350,000 Armenians to the Caucasus, giving this area a new significance as a safe haven under Russian rule. The perceptions of the "lost homeland" with regard to the territories in the Ottoman Empire reinforced the idea of the existence of Armenians in a defined and delimited territory (ibid.). This idea was opposed to the concepts of "Armenia without Armenians" or "Armenians without Armenia"



**Figure 3: Borders of the Alexandropol, Yerevan, Kazakh and part of Elizavetpol governorates, proposed by Armenian lawyer and later member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia (1919) Gevorg Khatisyan in Petrograd in 1917.** Red lines: borders of governorates; blue lines: borders of former uezds; black lines: borders of new uezds. Source: National Archives of Armenia.

circulated by—as it was interpreted in the Armenian press—their enemies, whether Turks or Bolsheviks (Apagai 1921). At the end of World War I, in a period of extraordinary territorial changes, the first substantial geopolitical visions about a delimited territory in which independent Armenia would emerge as a sovereign state appeared. The genocide had ensured that very few Armenians lived in the areas of Eastern Anatolia that Armenians have always considered their historical homeland. However, an independent state with secure borders was to serve as the guarantee for the return of the surviving Armenians.

Yet the plans drawn up by the Armenian political and intellectual elite looked quite different on the ground. On March 3, 1918, Russia ended its participation in World War I by signing the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty. What followed in a period of merely four years, between 1918 and 1921, were negotiations on the international stage and the signing of a series of treaties, including the Treaty of Batumi between the Ottoman Empire and the three Transcaucasian states, signed on June 4, 1918; the Treaty of Sèvres between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, signed on August 10, 1920; the Treaty of Alexandropol between the Republic of Armenia and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, signed on December 3, 1920; the Treaty of Moscow between the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and Russia, signed on March 16, 1921; and the Treaty of Kars between Turkey and the three Transcaucasian Soviet Republics, signed on October 13, 1921. Each and every one of these treaties defined, shifted, or drew the borders in the South Caucasus differently and in a way that rarely reflected the territorial expectations of any of the parties involved.

After the dissolution of the short-lived Transcaucasian Republic—which had existed for barely a month between April and May 1918—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia declared their independence one after the other. On May 28, 1918, the leaders of the Dashnaktsut'iun party proclaimed the first Democratic Republic of Armenia on the basis of the former Armenian provinces of the Tsarist Empire (Hovannisian 1971, 33). The two years in which this republic existed were marked by wars against Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia over territorial claims and the definition of borders. Faced with a Turkish offensive in Transcaucasia, and Turkey's military superiority, the Armenian government was forced to sign a peace treaty in Batumi on June 4, 1918, according to which the territory of the Republic of Armenia was to be reduced to some 10,000 square kilometers and only include a part of the Erevan province and several neighbouring regions.

Running counter to this factual situation was the prospect of another Armenian state with a radically different border demarcation, as proposed by President Woodrow Wilson for the Treaty of Sèvres. This project would have secured an extensive territory for the future

Armenian state, containing the vilayets of Erzurum, Van, and Bitlis, and with access to the Black Sea through part of the Turkish vilayet of Trabzon. Some 96,500 square kilometers would have been allocated to Armenia if the project had become a reality. However, neither Turkey nor Russia, which controlled parts of Armenia, were interested in Wilson's mediation (Ambrosius 2017, 189). Although the so-called "Wilsonian Armenia" remained a "purely cartographic construct" (Broers 2019, 69), from the Armenian perspective it was the only negotiable project for an Armenian state. Even after the Bolsheviks came to power in December 1920—at which point the majority of Armenians, especially those living abroad, wondered whether the concept of an independent Armenia was now to be considered a memory—the Sèvres Peace Treaty was viewed as the only available legitimate document on Armenia's borders. In 1921, the Paris Committee of the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party still hoped that the western borders of Armenia, established by Wilson's draft, would become a reality, while the eastern borders could still be negotiated with neighbouring states, which were now "de facto Bolshevik Russia" (Apagai 1921).

The historical development of perceptions, and allocations of meaning to particular territories, becomes clearer when the Armenian national project is juxtaposed with projects on nationhood and territoriality among Caucasian Muslims. For the formation of their national identity and the resulting national project of today's Azerbaijanis, their self-perception as well as the foreign attributions of the Russian Empire were at first decisive. In the imperial Russian classification, on the one hand, the Turkic-speaking tribes of the Caucasus were equated with the Tatars in the Ural region and the Crimea, which led to their designation as "Caucasian Tatars" (Baghirova 2019, 18). On the other hand, because of their language, they were equated with the ethnic Turkic population living in the north-western part of Iran and were referred to as "Persian" or "Azerbaijani" Tatars, which later became a key element in the identity formation processes of contemporary Azerbaijanis (Broers 2019, 51).

From the second half of the 19th century, in the midst of the nation-building process, Islamic thinkers developed different projects which located the Muslim community



**Figure 4. Boundary between Armenia and Turkey according to the Treaty of Sèvres**. Source: Wikipedia (public domain), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilsonian_Armenia#/media/File:Boundary_between_Turkey_and_Armenia_as_determined_by_Woodrow_Wilson_1920.jpg.

in a reformed Ottoman Empire (the Turcophile project), a reformed Russian Empire (the Liberal project), or in a modernized yet global Islamic community (the Islamist project) (ibid.). Religion remained the decisive factor in Muslim self-consciousness, even if a certain degree of secularization took hold among Caucasian Muslims. The evolution of the national identity of today's Azerbaijanis developed within this general Muslim context (Balayev 2015, 138). While these projects initially focused on cultural and linguistic aspects, by the early 20th century they aimed to define a national identity separate from the common Muslim space (Baghirova 2019, 16–18).

Fundamental to identity formation was the ideological transition from Islamism to Turkism (Balayev 2015, 139), which provided the basis for the development of ideas about national independence and the articulation of territorial aspirations. As a result, the development of an Azerbaijani-Tatar identity went beyond the boundaries of the aspirations for cultural autonomy held by Tatars and other Muslims living within the imperial borders, and led to a claim of Muslim majority within the territorial reference area of the future Azerbaijan (Broers 2019, 52). The project took on a more concrete form in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and in parallel with the emergence of the idea of liberation for socially oppressed Muslims within a national homeland (ibid.).

The formation of the national-democratic party "Musavat" (Equality) in 1911, under the leadership of the Muslim intellectual Mohammad Emin Rasulzadeh (1884–1955), initiated a new phase in the national movement of the Caucasian Muslims. Rasulzadeh was originally a protagonist of the idea of the unity of all Muslims, the basis of which was the notion that there were no national differences among Turkic peoples, as they all simultaneously belonged to the Turkic nation based on unified religious principles. The idea of Pan-Turkism, i.e., a single Turkic state uniting all Turkic peoples, expressed as "Turkization, Islamization, Europeanization" (Pekesen 2019), quickly gained popularity among Muslims in

the Russian Empire and was soon classified by the Russian authorities as a threat to the imperial order. Over time, however, the idea of a nation-state within defined borders became detached from the idea of Pan-Turkism. Rasulzadeh played a key role in developing the concept that provided the theoretical basis for the formation of an Azerbaijani nation-state as the final stage of the nation-building process (Balayev 2015, 141). During World War I, when great empires were shaken to their foundations, and against the background of the revolutionary upheavals of 1917, the question of national identity among the Muslim population of the Russian Empire took on sharper contours, leading to the establishment of an independent Azerbaijani state with concrete territorial demands.

On May 28, 1918, Azerbaijan declared its independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, though without a clear demarcation of borders. In fact, the declarations of independence of all three Caucasian republics either did not name any specific national territories or the territorial claims were formulated extremely vaguely (Saparov 2015, 38). The memorandum presented by the Azerbaijani delegation prior to the Paris Peace Conference in November 1918 covered a territory of some 113,900 square kilometers claimed by the Azerbaijani state including, among others, the provinces of Elizavetpol and Erevan with the districts of Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan (Davydova 2018, 143–144). These were territories so firmly contested by both Armenia and Azerbaijan that it was almost impossible to define a mutually acceptable state border.

A further factor that rendered the situation even more complicated was the existence of countless ethnolinguistic islands of widely varying sizes, created throughout the Caucasus due to Tsarist administrative policies, and in which one particular population group formed the majority and another a substantial minority. A significant number of Armenians, for instance, lived in the territories claimed by Azerbaijan, while a large



**Figure 5. Borders of the Republic of Armenia proposed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919**. Source: Wikipedia (public domain), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_r%C3%A9publique_de_l%27Arm%C3%A9nie_(1919)_par_Z._Khanzadian.jpg.



**Figure 6. Territorial Claims of Republic of Azerbaijan in 1919**. Source: Wikipedia (public domain), https://ru.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Claims_of_Azerbaijan_in_Paris_Peace_Conference_(1919).jpg.

Muslim minority resided in the Armenian-claimed territories. Nearly one third of the population of the Elizavetpol Governorate was of Armenian descent, as was the case in the mountainous part of Karabakh. Conversely, Muslims formed a substantial minority in the Erevan Governorate, accounting for more than one third of the population (Broers 2019, 53). In fact, Arnold Toynbee, adviser to the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, described the Armenian and Tatar populations along the assumed Armenian–Azerbaijani border as so hopelessly mixed that it would be impossible to draw a border even remotely based on ethnographic principles. He therefore proposed the border between the former Russian provinces of Erevan and Elizavetpol as the best physical boundary, which, however, left comparatively large Armenian and Muslim minorities, respectively, on the other side of the border line (Imranli-Lowe 2012, 218–219). The creation of new states based on inherited Russian administrative boundaries therefore made the formation of significant minorities inevitable (Broers 2019, 54). This demographic diversity posed significant challenges to the respective national border demarcation processes, making them the epitome of complex geopolitical, political, and social struggles.

## The Top-Down Definition of Borders by the Bolsheviks

The three South Caucasian republics' brief period of independence was marked by interregional power struggles, the Armenian–Turkish War, the military advance of the Bolsheviks, and, in the course of these events, repeated interethnic clashes. The most severe pogroms took place in Baku in 1918, originally ignited by the conflict between the Bolsheviks and Armenian Dashnaks on the one hand and the Musavat Party on the other. After the city's capture by the Ottoman army, separate attacks against the Armenians and other Christians followed, with up to 20,000 people falling victim to these two massacres (De Waal 2013, 100).

In April 1920, the rapid march of the 11th Army ended with the Sovietization of Azerbaijan. The lack of a clear and recognized border with Armenia, as well as the explicit support for Azerbaijan's territorial claims by the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party, provided an opportunity for the now Soviet Azerbaijan to gain the upper hand in the conflict over the disputed territories of Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhichevan. At the same time, in June–July 1920, the Armenian government was negotiating with the Bolsheviks in Moscow for recognition of Armenia's independence within the borders to be established for the forthcoming Treaty of Sèvres.

On August 10, 1920, the same day the Treaty of Sèvres was signed, an agreement was reached between Soviet Russia and the Republic of Armenia. This was

in line with the Bolsheviks' plans to eliminate the issue of the "disputed territories" from the political agenda of the Western powers and turn it into a diplomatic issue between Russia and Soviet Azerbaijan (Virabyan 2022, 76). According to the agreement, Armenian troops were to withdraw from Zangezur, leaving the disputed territories to be taken over by the 11th Army. However, all attempts by the Red Army to take control of Zangezur failed due to Armenian resistance. The situation became even more complicated when the Turkish army, led by Nazim Karabekir, invaded Armenia at the end of September 1920, in order to prevent the implementation of the obligations stipulated in the Treaty of Sèvres, in particular the cession of the territories recognized as part of Armenia. Unable to resist the Turkish advance, the Armenian government sued for peace, which was signed in Alexandropol on December 2, 1920. However, this treaty was not ratified, as political power in Armenia had already been handed over to the Bolsheviks.

From this moment on, the decision on the border situation was subordinated to the Caucasus Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which settled the issue in several stages, taking into account both domestic and foreign policy conditions. Upon the Sovietization of Armenia, the Council of People's Commissars of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic declared the problems of the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan resolved by recognizing Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Nagorno-Karabakh as integral parts of Armenia. In an article in *Pravda*, Stalin welcomed the Sovietization of Armenia and declared, inter alia, Azerbaijan's relinquishment of sovereignty claims to Nakhichevan, Zangezur, and Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Stalin, the long-standing dispute between Armenia and the "Muslims surrounding the country" was resolved in a single stroke by establishing fraternal solidarity between the workers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey (Obrazovanie SSSR 1949, 159). However, shortly thereafter, Azerbaijani Soviet authorities began to press for the return of these territories, asserting especially Nagorno-Karabakh's economic ties to Azerbaijan. In turn, the Caucasus Bureau continued to insist on resolving the issue based on the basic principles of ethnic homogeneity and self-determination. The heads of the Caucasus Bureau, Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Sergei Kirov, announced to the Council of People's Commissars of Azerbaijan that in order to settle all disputes and establish truly friendly relations between the two states, no single Armenian village ought to be affiliated with Azerbaijan, and equally, no single Muslim village could be affiliated with Armenia (National Archive of Armenia). However, ethnic and economic factors in the disputed territories overlapped in such a way as to make no single optimal solution possible. Eventually, the Russian–Turkish peace treaty of March 16, 1921 determined the future border course by establishing the autonomous status of Nakhichevan under Azerbaijani suzerainty, while

the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh—illegitimate from the Armenian point of view—was sealed on July 5, 1921, at the plenary session of the Caucasus Bureau. On July 7, 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region was created within the Azerbaijani SSR.

Although the political decision of the Soviet leadership established new borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a final agreement to resolve the border issue was, however, not signed at that time. During the 1920s, while a consensus was reached on the main issues along the borderline, they were nevertheless never completely settled. This made the border regions between Armenia and Azerbaijan places where conflicts of varying intensity flared up time and again until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These conflicts were often linked to ideas about earlier administrative divisions, so that the actual borders in these regions were repeatedly shifted not only by political decisions but also by the actions of regional actors. Border demarcation processes in such places interacted particularly intensively with ideas about former linguistic, cultural, and economic spaces, which made the border between the socialist republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan contested on several levels. Not only the formation of autonomous units and various Armenian enclaves in Azerbaijan, and vice versa, but also the rivalry over strategically important heights, water reserves, and economically relevant landscapes caused recurrent tensions and repeated border shifts during the Soviet period.

The border demarcation processes in the early Soviet years were subject to their own dynamics, the logic of which remains highly controversial among specialists. Some experts see Lenin's commitment to the creation of a federal structure with a multitude of national territories and autonomous units as the cause of the complex problem of national minorities in the Soviet Union. The enormous ethnolinguistic diversity of the Caucasian region made it impossible to create politically viable units with coinciding territorial and national boundaries for all ethnic minorities (Hunter 2006, 113). Consequently, the Soviet leadership drew the borders in a way that would secure the centre's position of power. Other authors, conversely, reject the supposedly arbitrary demarcation of borders and see the Soviet leadership's nationalities policy as an attempt to settle the ethnic conflicts once and for all (Saparov 2015). However, since problematic situations can arise whenever borders are drawn without taking into account people's national identity or ethnicity and culture, even the 70 years of the Soviet ideology of fraternity could not completely suppress the nationalist struggles that were silenced during the Soviet period. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet states "claimed borders according to national criteria with all that this entailed, including a separate, ethnically based history, a shared and special future and a particular, nationally bounded time-space" (Donnan 2017, 8).

## Conclusion

In the South Caucasus, the 19th and early 20th centuries were permeated by major spatial transformations and constant border demarcations. On the one hand, these processes were the result of the imperial centre's policy of social, cultural, and economic integration of the region into the Tsarist Empire; on the other hand, they were subject to economic developments and social practices as well as ethnic conflicts and competing conceptions of nationhood and territory on the ground. Despite the constantly changing political circumstances, the geographical and symbolic significance of borders materialized in the everyday lives and practices of people in the border regions. For them, the so-called phantom borders also had a life-world meaning, even if this was not always a consciously reflected perception. What is more, borders as physical markers between individual provinces in the Russian Empire were, at best, relevant at the administrative level, and could appear and disappear within a short period of time depending on the centre's political goals in the region. Much more relevant were the structures and institutions created by actors on the ground, the connecting and also disconnecting infrastructure, social, and cultural practices that had established territorial structures whose "effectiveness could long outlast the existence of a state" (von Hirschhausen 2015, 18–19).

Apart from the fact that the phantom borders continued to persist as part of historical memory and social life, they played an even more decisive role at the political level. The former provinces of the Tsarist Empire reappeared at the end of World War I, and fundamentally influenced the process of state-building of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis in 1918–1921. However, the territorial arrangements of the Tsarist Empire, as well as its policy of political assimilation and economic integration of the region, had led to the settlement of Armenians and Caucasian Muslims on almost the entire territory of the South Caucasus in such a way that the "ethnic settlement principle" as a basis for the border demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan inevitably led to a series of conflicts. Ethnic rivalries, as well as a desire for control over strategic infrastructures and natural resources in a region with complicated economic and transport geography, were among the decisive factors behind border demarcation.

The appropriation of historical space in the South Caucasus by nations living within its borders was characterized by multiple factors, including memories of the past that shaped local border perceptions. Various methods and criteria were therefore considered for the final demarcation of the borders between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet Republics in the early 1920s, ranging from ethnic and cultural aspects to ecological conditions, and political, legal, and economic arguments. However, the political measures took place against the backdrop of competing concepts of state-

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regional border demarcation on the one hand and ethnic demarcation attempts on the other. While the emotionally charged historical and cultural interpretive categories heated tempers socially, at the political level—given the complicated economic and geographic structure of the region—the desire to gain and retain control over strategic infrastructure and natural resources stood at the forefront.

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, and the subsequent negotiations on the new border demarcation which continue to this day, have once again triggered debates in Armenia as well as in Azerbaijan about previous eras' border ideas and concepts. In Armenian society, the Wilsonian model as arbitral decision has been reinvigorated, while Azerbaijan makes claims regarding the Armenian province Syunik (Zangezur) and even Erevan. Ultimately, despite today's internationally recognized border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the borders from earlier eras continue to resonate and have a great influence on the socialization processes in the border regions.

## Endnotes

1   The most recent military attack of Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 has led to an exodus of almost all Armenians, approximately 120,000 people, from this region to Armenia.

2   One particularly severe historical moment for the Armenians was the conquest of the Persian ruler Shah Abbas (1571–1629), who initially occupied the South Caucasus but was forced to withdraw under pressure from the Turkish army. During his retreat in 1604, vast numbers of Armenians were resettled in the inner provinces of the Persian Empire, altering the demography of the Erevan and Nakhijevan Khanates in favor of the Muslim population. Herzig, Edmund. 1990. The Deportation of the Armenians in 1604–05 and Europe's Myth of Shah Abbas I. Cambridge: Pembroke Papers.

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