

BOOK REVIEW

Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba, by Timothy Blauvelt, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, 264 pp., \$136 (hardcover), ISBN 9781032010007, \$39.16 (paperback), ISBN 9781032010021.

This is a detailed case study of the rise and fall of one of the numerous “family circles” that emerged in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. The framework used by Blauvelt, as the title indicates, is clientelism—networks of allies that extended both downward to clients in lower-level administrative posts and upward to patrons in the central Soviet leadership. The political context created incentives for regional leaders to build a network of trusted aides and subordinates, many of whom would be relatives or long-time acquaintances. Competence mattered far less than loyalty, and in the Caucasus this practice of rewarding members of one’s clan conformed neatly with prevailing cultural norms. Maintaining one’s position also required proving usefulness and, ideally, irreplaceability to patrons. Blauvelt’s approach is an application of pioneering work on Soviet clientelism by Gerald Easter in the context of politics of the Caucasus.

Blauvelt’s central focus is on one regional official, Nestor Lakoba, the most famous leader in the history of Abkhazia, a small region south of Russia on the Black Sea. Lakoba had been an active participant in the Bolshevik movement at the time of the revolution and was head of the region from 1922 until his death in 1936. Lakoba dominated the region, not from the post of party first secretary as was usually the case but as head of the regional government. Links to high-level Soviet officials, including Stalin himself, were made easier by the fact that they came to Abkhazia for rest and relaxation. (Fifty years later, Mikhail Gorbachev would similarly benefit from running another spa destination, Stavropol’ krai.)

The region’s administrative status changed over time, but the Abkhaz were always the titular nationality, even though they constituted no more than about one-fourth of the population. From 1922 to 1931, Abkhazia was a nested republic within Georgia, which in turn was part of Transcaucasian Federation. In 1931, Abkhazia’s formal status was reduced still further to “autonomous republic” within Georgia, a status it would maintain until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Lakoba was from Gudauta, the only part of Abkhazia where the Abkhaz comprised a majority. He placed and retained relatives and friends in most key posts, despite their tendency to engage in corrupt and criminal behavior. Because his appointees were mostly ethnically Abkhaz, Lakoba’s personnel decisions fit the early Soviet policy of *korenizatsiya*—demonstrating local control by giving posts to the titular nationality of a non-Russian region. Given the region’s ethnic makeup, though, this became a source of friction with Abkhazia’s Georgian, Armenian, Russian, and Greek populations. Lakoba was adept at mobilizing the support of higher officials, including Sergo Orjonikidze and Stalin, to remain in power for 15 years despite repeated challenges on multiple fronts.

Lakoba was only 43 when he died in December 1936, presumably poisoned at a dinner at Lavrenty Beria’s home in Tbilisi. Blauvelt pursues an interesting thread demonstrating the changing relationship between Lakoba and Beria, the future NKVD head. For most of Lakoba’s career, until 1932, he and Beria were allies and part of the same patronage network. When Stalin chose Beria to head the Transcaucasian Regional Party Committee in 1932—with Lakoba’s support—Beria came to see Lakoba and his clients as an obstacle to extending his power to include Abkhazia. Beria’s apparent motive for getting rid of Lakoba was to eliminate the Lakoba political machine and replace it with his own loyalists. Beria took the first step while Lakoba was still alive, replacing the Abkhazian regional party leader with a rival in January 1936. Lakoba was accused of being an “enemy of the people” two months after his death, and his allies were soon targeted in a major purge

and executed. Later, Beria and the Georgian leadership implemented a harsh anti-Abkhaz agenda in all areas that continued until Stalin's and Beria's deaths in 1953. Blauvelt makes a convincing case that the ethnic component of this rivalry was less important than the struggle for power and control.

Selective memory can distort historical reality for current political needs. There is little evidence to support accusations that Lakoba was an Abkhaz nationalist. His public speeches and reports (a collection appeared first in the early perestroika period) emphasized an obligation to meet the needs of all ethnic groups in the region and avoid policies that would suggest "Abkhazia is for the Abkhaz." Nevertheless, the show trial of Lakoba and his team in November 1937 included charges that they "always enflamed nationalism and undertook nationalist propaganda, poisoning the Abkhaz against Georgia" (p. 214). Lakoba's untimely death gave him martyr status, and the state-building needs of later Abkhaz leaders led them to turn Lakoba into a national hero. The imagined role of Lakoba as an opponent of Beria's anti-Abkhaz policies helped contemporary "ethnic entrepreneurs" construct a separatist agenda when Georgia became independent in 1991.

Blauvelt makes full use of access to multiple archives, including those of the Georgian communist party and a collection of Lakoba's personal papers that made it to the Hoover Institution. The nature of this material led to author to focus on events that were well documented in the archives, in particular "hostile reports, denunciations, investigatory committees, Party tribunals, and ultimately a staged show trial" (p. 5). The core of the book is devoted to play-by-play descriptions of challenges to Lakoba's rule as revealed in official party investigations. To this reader, Blauvelt includes too many excessively detailed summaries of too many documents. Lakoba's opponents constantly attempted to readjudicate past controversies, which makes the content of several chapters seem repetitive. Overall, though, this is a worthy case study of how politics in an ethnically conflicted region developed in the early Soviet era. This book would be of greatest value to specialists and graduate students focusing on cadre policy in the early Soviet period and on questions of ethnic mobilization. It demonstrates how Soviet multilevel asymmetrical federalism combined with ethnocentric clientelism contributed to the convulsive waves of Stalinism—radical socioeconomic upheaval followed by purges of the party and bureaucracy.

Darrell Slider
University of South Florida (Tampa), USA
slider@usf.edu
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