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Driscoll, Jesse

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Jesse Driscoll

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SYMPOSIUM

Mobilization in the Shadow of Probabilistic Military Assistance: A Commentary on Anastasia Shesterinina's *Mobilizing in Uncertainty*

JESSE DRISCOLL *

University of California, San Diego, CA, USA

In *Mobilizing in Uncertainty* (2021), Anastasia Shesterinina curates a set of memories shared by Abkhaz community members. Respondents explain why they were willing to take such great risks in 1992 in their own words. The result is a locally-valid historical reconstruction leaning heavily on Abkhaz oral histories. It is provocative, beautifully crafted, destined to be translated into both Russian and Abkhaz, and brings something marvelous to the field. The case is a potent reminder that, sometimes, a month of focused political violence can freeze a map for decades.

Because Abkhazia is such a difficult place to access, most accounts of the ideological battles of the early 1990s are informed by materials found in libraries and by interviews conducted in Tbilisi. Meanwhile, however, life has gone on in a rump Abkhaz state. De-facto independence has been a social reality for 30 years. Shesterinina's research design captures and amplifies the worldview of her core subjects: self-defined Abkhaz patriots, currently living in Abkhazia. Her respondents remember a war of national liberation. She chose to live for a long time among residents of this unrecognized political organism. She asked a lot of her subjects. She earned their trust gradually. She makes it clear that *Mobilization in Uncertainty* stands on many shoulders: veterans that shared oral histories, countless deceased elementary school teachers and librarians who organized letter-writing campaigns in Soviet times, and more than one special archive that no other researcher will access. An Abkhaz nation is reified with survivalist traits in Shesterinina's text: adaptive, creative, and stubborn.

*Correspondence Address: Email: jdriscoll@ucsd.edu

Political institutions mattered a great deal in shaping Abkhaz conceptualization of their strategic situation. The Abkhaz had managed to maintain their ASSR, what Phil Roeder has usefully called a *segment state* (a geographic homeland, a legally-recognized space on an intersubjective map, a census category, etc.). For Shesterinina, what is most relevant about these institutions is that they enabled subjective self-understandings and quotidian connections making collective action possible. ‘Abkhaz identity’ served as a useful focal point. People saw themselves as ‘a people’ first, then ‘a people under threat’ (by a variety of processes usefully summarized in her figure 2.3, for those graduate students skimming and looking for a cheat sheet). So at the moment that the Soviet Union ceased to exist, some members of Abkhaz civil society, anticipating the need might arrive, had been working for years to develop strategies to produce violence disproportionate to their numbers if needed. Then they were needed. When the war came, Shesterinina’s subjects recall feeling they were improvising minute-by-minute as they mobilized defensively. It is also clear from her research that the parts, the stage, and the music had been scripted in advance. A heroic last stand, and the sketches of a basic plan for guerilla tactics based on attrition to keep the Georgian masses at bay, emerged with great speed.

As a meticulously-documented study of social mobilization mechanisms, narrated against the backdrop of imperial disintegration, the book succeeds completely. As a broader account of post-colonial violence in the South Caucasus, the success is caveated. Shesterinina devotes just 15 pages to advancing the clock from 1992 to 2019, signaling her intent to write a micro-study of a single event. Fair enough. The 1992 war is a critical juncture in Georgian political history. It is not hard to convince me that this is worth doing for its own sake. Within this constraint, a counterfactual discussions of Russia’s military role would have still strengthened the argument.

Shesterinina is aware that many reasonable people—in Georgia and elsewhere—believe that the real important decisions in this part of the world in the early 1990s were made by commanders tracking a chain of command that led to Moscow. Airplanes do not take off without orders. Consider as an analogy the 1999 war in Kosovo. On the one hand, it leaves out a lot to think of this as just a clash between NATO and Serbia, the voices of Kosovars should not be excluded, etc.. On the other hand, you actually cannot tell a coherent story of Kosovar mobilization, or their self-styled liberation movement, without considering their interactive relationship with the NATO governments that could drop smart bombs from the sky. Let us stipulate that the shadow of intervention does not explain *everything*. Let us stipulate also that it is a defensible scientific move to focus on how a mobilization for war *begins*, independent of how it ends. I still suspect that many Abkhaz fighters were thinking strategically about audiences outside of the South Caucasus. I’ll bet Shesterinina does, too.

Mobilizing in Uncertainty correctly reminds readers that ‘Russia’ was not much of a coherent actor in 1992. Who in Moscow was really even picking up the phone amidst all the chaos? We may never be able to know who picked up a phone, or if it rang. Asking this question in this way misses the point, though. What should matter, for Shesterinina’s text, was whether Abkhaz might have *believed* that someone in Moscow *would* pick up the phone. Because of the transparency of Shesterinina’s research design, we know that counterfactual scenarios about the involvement from Soviet military and police forces (replicating their response to the 1989 clashes) were not probed. This is too bad. It might have been a theoretically fruitful line of inquiry.

Instead, Shesterinina invokes the symmetry of responses across geographically diverse communities in Abkhazia. If expectations about what Moscow would do were the crucial variable, she argues, there should have been more differences visible in the data between the recollections of Abkhaz residents living in very close proximity to the Georgia-Russian border and those living further away. She reports she found none. My problem with this inference is that Abkhazia is so small that the distances between communities could not matter very much operationally. A single brigade, or a well-supplied battalion with reliable local allies, could have locked the whole area down.

This has implications for the puzzle framing. Shesterinina's early assertion is that Abkhaz militants must have known they were outweighed demographically by Georgians 50:1. If my hunch is correct, however, participants at the time might not have believed the ratio was so skewed. Might Abkhaz have imagined themselves *not* as a tiny group confined to a ASSR, but part of a much larger, civilized, Russian-speaking community standing in solidarity against majoritarian ethnic chauvinism? (This would alter the numerator.) Did a few thuggish, criminal nationalists dressing up in black leather jackets and calling themselves *Mkhedrioni* speak for the whole Georgian nation? (If not, it would alter the denominator.)

Interrogating these assumptions is important. Thousands of families were brutally expelled from their homes. They still have not been allowed to go home. They would say that they were ethnically cleansed. They would say this is itself a kind of face-validity evidence that Georgians were not the stronger power. In any case, these departed voices are largely omitted from the study. Many other families relocated from the territory of Abkhazia after the war but before the study started, for one reason or another. Also omitted. The perspectives of decision-makers in Moscow and Tbilisi are not solicited, either. Shesterinina claims to be uninterested in engaging the geopolitical imaginary, and describes what (I hope!) most readers will recognize as a tragic security dilemma. I suppose I wish that there had been more direct questioning of whether it was foreseen that a Russian military intervention *might* 'lock in' a temporary military advantage. It was not over-determined that volunteers would arrive overland from the North Caucasus, that they would be reinforced by the Russian military, or that the Russian military presence would be eventually reinforced by CIS soldiers wearing blue hats. Uncertainty, as per the book's title, is surely the right word.

I do not think the decades-long frozen conflict could have been foreseeable in its particulars, of course, but I think the preferences of shadowy distant actors in Moscow lurk in the background of most of the peacefully-brokered resolutions that settled local ethnicized property rights nearby (in Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kvemo Kartli, etc.). The difference that made the difference in Abkhazia was uncertainty about how Moscow would respond to violence in this particular corner of the periphery. Perhaps the relevant comparative question should be rephrased: 'What did titular capitals think Russia would do if "its" people were antagonized?' It certainly seems locals behaved as if they believed that help might arrive. Then help *did* arrive. Was it to help Abkhaz go on the offense, as most Georgian nationalist historians assert? Or to defend themselves, as Shesterinina asserts? Is this resolvable? Does it matter?

Shesterinina's answer seems to be 'no.' Her goal is rather to make clear how uncertain and muddled the strategic operational environment must have been to families *that are still actually living in residence in Abkhazia*. Decades ago, when they were trying to navigate the shifting geopolitical plate tectonics, her subjects were not marionettes. Neither were

their Georgian antagonists. With the benefit of hindsight, we use the shorthand of a 'Russian intervention,' but, at the time, political authority would have felt contested and confused.

I walked away from this book saddened by the failure of imagination by Gamsakhurdia, a political leader who was apparently incapable of anticipating the consequences of his political program. He chose to give overt political cover to Georgians who wanted to shame, terrorize, and humiliate the Abkhaz minority. In doing so, he played right into Moscow's playbook. Gamsakhurdia gambled on inaction by Moscow. A bad bet, in hindsight.

This minor quibble should not overshadow my admiration for the author. For teachers of qualitative research methods in simmering conflict zones, Shesterinina represents an exemplar of self-aware, transparent empirical research conduct. Her bravery, conduct, and ethos should inspire political scientists, anthropologists and sociologists. Something is gained when a researcher slows down, listens, and gets to know one's community subjects intimately. As a work of subversive history, *Mobilizing in Uncertainty* has earned a special place on conflict resolution syllabi. Shesterinina revisits a contested social history in order to place readers in a sympathetic lineage running back through decades of Abkhaz social memory. If this perspective is disorienting to some readers, it just becomes evidence that Shesterinina's book is necessary.

Disclosure Statement

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ORCID

Jesse Driscoll  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6880-6268>

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