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The Muslim uprising in Ajara and the Stalinist revolution in the periphery

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In 1929, local officials in the mountainous region of upper Ajara in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) pursued aggressive policies to force women to remove their veils and to close religious schools, provoking the Muslim peasant population to rebellion in one of the largest and most violent of such incidents in Soviet history. The central authorities in Moscow authorized the use of Red Army troops to suppress the uprising, but they also reversed the local initiatives and offered the peasants concessions. Based on Party and secret police files from the Georgian archives in Tbilisi and Batumi, this article will explore the ways in which local cadres interpreted regime policies in this Muslim region of Georgia, and the interaction of the center and periphery in dealing with national identity, Islam, gender, and everyday life in the early Soviet period.

Keywords: Georgia; Adjara; Islam; gender; de-veiling; Soviet periphery

After nearly two days of difficult marching in harsh weather over steep mountain roads in the highlands of Ajaristan, on 24 March 1929 two battalions of the Red Army from Batumi, supported by armored cars and a third company from Akhaltsikhe, a detachment of several hundred armed Communist activists (*kommunary*), and some border guard units encircled the district of Khulo to suppress an uprising by Muslim peasants that had raged for several weeks. Secret police reports estimated that 700 rebels, half of them armed with rifles and hand grenades, were holed up in a mountain village, and another 400 were further to the south west. The rebels also had several Lewis machine guns, seized through raids on Soviet guard outposts on the Turkish border. At the start of the uprising on 7 March, the rebels took the top leadership of the Ajaran Autonomous Republic as hostages, including the Chairman of the Sovnarkom (Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov – Council of People's Commissars), Memed Gogoberidze, the head of the Ajaran Executive Committee, the republic's prosecutor, and GPU (Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie – State Political Directorate) representatives. They demanded that the Soviet regime cease its efforts to close religious schools (*madrassa*) and to compel women to remove their veils (*chadra*). From Moscow, Stalin closely followed the events. On 9 March, the third day of the

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uprising, he sent an urgent telegram to the Transcaucasian leadership in Tiflis urging concessions:

It seems you have made a mistake in carrying out the removal of the *chadra* by force. This is not our policy, it is mistaken to its core. I propose that troops not be used. Do not allow any shooting or executions. Start negotiations with the so-called rebels and explain to them that no violence will henceforth be used towards religion, and in particular regarding the removal of the *chadra*.¹

The Transcaucasian Regional Committee (Zakkraikom)² First Secretary Orakhelashvili cabled to Stalin regularly as events unfolded. When it became clear that the uprising in this sensitive border region could not be resolved through assurances and negotiation, Stalin gave instructions to “liquidate the counter-revolutionary rebellion in Ajaristan by all possible means,” yet he again “proposed to the Central Committee of Ajaristan to hold off on implementing a decree on the removal of the *chadra*, and to recognize as absolutely unallowable any sort of violence or administrative pressure in the struggle with the religious prejudices of the masses.”³

When the Red Army troops finally launched an assault on 25 March, the rebels scattered. Six were killed, two wounded, and 41 taken prisoner, and two Red Army soldiers were killed in the engagement. A large group of the rebelling peasants, including some of the ringleaders, were able to break through the encirclement and escape across the Turkish border.

Thus ended the active phase of the uprising in Ajaristan. The Party and state leadership and the secret police struggled to understand the underlying causes of the rebellion, launching investigations into the ethnographic, economic, and political context and making concessions to the peasants in order to prevent something similar from happening again, at the same time that the regime was elsewhere undertaking a massive and brutal revolution in the countryside. In the historiography of the Soviet periphery, much attention has been devoted to the complex relationship between the Bolsheviks and Islam in the 1920s, and especially to the attempts of the regime to transform the realm of everyday life and aspects such as the veiling of women and the role of religious education among its Muslim communities, especially in Central Asia (Keller 1998; Kamp 2002, 2006; Edgar 2003; Northrop 2004). Yet the largest and most violent confrontation between Muslim subjects and the Soviet regime over these issues took place not there, but in Soviet Georgia. As in Central Asia, however, the interaction of the regime and the Muslim peasants in Ajaristan similarly demonstrates a key phase of the ongoing encounter between the Soviet authorities and local society in this distant periphery, and the ways in which local elites attempted to pursue their own interest as mediators between center and periphery in implementing the Stalinist revolution at the local level, and how the actors at different levels were ultimately transformed by the techniques, goals, and structures of Soviet power and how it shaped and reshaped their identities.

A periphery of the periphery

Ajara (sometimes spelled Adjara or Achara, and Adzhariia in Russian) is a region of approximately 3000 square kilometers in the south west of Georgia. The capital city of Batumi is located on the Black Sea coastal part of the territory, as is the semi-tropical resort district of Kobuleti. Further from the coast, much of the territory of Ajara is mountainous, part of the Lesser Caucasus range. During the early Middle Ages, Ajara was part of the western Georgian kingdoms of Egrisi and Tao-Klarjeti, and became a dukedom (*saer-istao*) of the united Georgian kingdom from the 10th century. Following the dissolution of

the medieval kingdom of Georgia in the 15th century, Ajara was conquered by and incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and the elites and eventually the peasantry converted to Islam, while retaining the use of the Georgian language. Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, Ajara (or Ajaristan as it was then often called) was ceded to the Russian Empire.⁴ After the annexation of Georgia by the Bolsheviks in 1921, the Treaty of Kars between Turkey and Soviet Russia recognized Soviet control of Ajara with the provision that the region be provided with autonomous status on the basis of religion, as the vast majority of the population were Sunni Muslims, especially in the mountainous regions. Aside from the Jewish Autonomous Region established later in the Soviet Far East, Ajara was the only autonomous entity in the USSR created on the basis of religion rather than on that of language and ethnicity (Hoch and Kopeček 2011, 9). The Ajaran Autonomous Republic was thus part of the Soviet Republic of Georgia (with its Party structure headed by a regional committee (*obkom*)), which in turn from 1922 to 1936 was part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR, the Party structure of which was headed by the Transcaucasus District Committee, or *Zakkraikom*).

The question of a formal decree

Nearly a year before the uprising, Varo (Varvara Mikhailovna) Japaridze, an old Bolshevik and head of the Transcaucasus Society for the Affairs of Female Workers and Peasants (ORK, the successor organization to *Zhenotdel*) brought the question of the *chadra* up before the Secretariat of the ZKK (Zakkraikom) Central Committee in May 1928, “after studying everyday anachronisms (*bytovye perezhitki*), not only in Ajaristan, but also in Akhaltsikhe and Borchalo.” Since then, she wrote a year later, “the question of the *chadra* has not left the agenda of the Secretariat or of the Presidium, or of the Georgian and Azerbaijani Central Committees – it has turned into a huge social campaign embracing the entire republic.”⁵ On 16 July 1928 the Presidium of the Adjara Obkom passed a resolution declaring a universal campaign for removing the *chadra* in the Khulo district to take place on 20–30 July (Turmanidze 2012, 56). The seventh Congress of Communist Organizations of the Transcaucasus in November 1928 passed a resolution on the “struggle against conservative relations to women,” proposed that the republican ORK form special committees to intensify efforts to eliminate the “everyday anachronisms,” and chose the campaign against the *chadra* as the priority in Azerbaijan and “Georgia–Ajaristan.”⁶ Meanwhile, on 10 November the Ajaran Obkom passed a resolution on the removal of the *chadra* and declared November a “month for de-veiling Ajaran women” (Turmanidze 2012, 57). In December 1928, the Zakkraikom made a decision “on the logic of conducting several administrative activities for the removal of the *chadra*,” up to and including a legal ban on the wearing of the *chadra* (Lomashvili 1972, 144). It was envisioned that such a decree would be published and approved at the next republican-level Congresses of Soviets in Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1929, after the new Soviets were elected in that same month of December 1928. Meanwhile, the Zakkraikom Control Commission suggested making the wearing of the *chadra* (or forcing or allowing female relatives to wear it) grounds for expulsion from the Party, and the Commissariat of Justice recommended that acts of hooliganism, violence or murder relating to the prevention of de-veiling be classified as counter-revolutionary crimes. At a 20 December session of the Georgian Party Central Committee, First Secretary M. Kipiani ordered that a draft bill for a decree on the wearing of the *chadra* be prepared within three weeks and that a commission be formed under the leadership of the Old Bolshevik Filipe Makharadze “and other authoritative comrades” to prepare for an all-Georgian congress of Ajaran and Turkish (i.e.

Azerbaijani) women. The same draft resolution underscored the necessity of punishing Party members who hesitated on the implementation of such issues through expulsion (Turmanidze 2012, 57). On 5–6 January 1929 an expanded session of the Presidium of the ZKK again discussed the issue, again confirming the decision of 20 December, and passed a resolution to begin activities for a struggle against the wearing of the *chadra*. Although critics of the decree at this session were accused of “supporting reaction and backwardness,” which “smacked of Right Deviation,” and support was expressed for the ongoing procedure to draft a decree, such a decree was not actually passed, as that step awaited the upcoming Congresses of Soviets. “Activities” of an “administrative nature,” however, were expected to be undertaken immediately.⁷

Reports of success

While the debate about legislation was underway in the corridors of power, local officials already felt pressure to implement such “activities,” not only for the removal of the *chadra*, but also for the other elements of the regime’s move to restrict Islam: the closing of the religious schools (*madrasa*) and the implementation of mandatory primary-level education in state Soviet schools. In the absence of a decree on these issues, the instruction to local Party officials was that the campaigns were to begin with Party and Komsomol members and their families, and that they were to serve as behavioral models for the rest of society, while at the same time “widely involving the *aktiv* (activists) of women (Party and non-party members) in work for removing the *chadra*.”⁸ The category thus soon expanded to include state office workers (*sluzhashie*) and employees of trade unions (*profsoiuzy*) as well. The Georgian Party resolved to “link” the removal of the *chadra*, the closing of the *madrasas*, and the introduction of mandatory education with the election campaign for the new Soviets that was to take place in December, and a “shock campaign” (*udarnaia kompaniia*) to conduct such “cultural activities in Ajaristan” was launched from the start of that month.⁹

In the fashion typical of the Bolshevik regime, local officials received exhortations and “signals” to energetically implement these policies, but little precise guidance on methods and limitations. The combined election and anti-religious campaigns thus proceeded in earnest through December 1928 and into January, and the initial reports proclaimed overwhelming success. Ajaran District Party Committee (Obkom) Secretary Pantskhava sent a telegram to the Georgian and Zakkraikom Central Committees on 22 January, one that would be heavily criticized in subsequent investigations, in which he reported that “the voluntary removal of the *chadra* is taking on a widespread character, and in places where until now men and women have never taken part in joint meetings before such cases have become frequent.” All 147 *madrasas* and *mektabe* (secular schools) had been closed, and “the population welcomes the introduction of compulsory education.” It continued:

Thanks to the able and energetic work of all organizations and comrades, and our reaction in a timely manner to all provocations from kulaks, *khodzhi* [Muslim clerics] and other anti-Soviet elements, all of this work was carried out without a single shot, without a single casualty, and even without a single case of violence against any representative of socialist construction.¹⁰

The ground had been prepared for the introduction of a decree on the removal of the *chadra*, Pantskhava concluded, and a Congress of Ajaran Women with 300 delegates was to be summoned on 10 February.¹¹ The resolution of a special session on the preliminary results of the election campaign of the Ajaran Obkom from later in January was similarly upbeat, reporting that the merging of the election campaign and that for “the removal of the *chadra*, the closing of the *madrasa* and for compulsory education” had given “enormously

positive results, expressed in mass removal of the *chadra*, the closing of all spiritual schools and an increase in the quantity of pupils in the Soviet schools.” The participation of women in the elections was particularly praised. Regular and compulsory “women’s meetings” were held in all of the districts and villages at which rousing speeches were heard on the joint campaigns, and women were encouraged to participate and to remove their *chadra*. Seventy to seventy-five per cent of women supposedly turned out for the election campaign, and “in fact women from Upper Ajara took part in such elections for the first time ever.” This active participation of women at the polling stations, together with men, “was the result of the correct line taken by the Ajaran Obkom for the emancipation (*raskreposhchenie*) of Ajaran women from everyday anachronisms.”¹²

The convening of the long-anticipated Congress of Ajaran Women in the autonomous republic’s capital of Batumi in February 1929 was reported in similarly positive tones. Initially, 21 spots at this Congress were allocated for Upper Ajaran delegates, but this number was increased to 120, and then to 160. Meetings were held in the villages to select the participants “on a voluntary basis.” Up to half were to be women who had already removed the *chadra*, and the rest were to be those who had not.¹³ Local Party officials and some of the delegates gave speeches on the emancipation of women in Ajaristan for an assemblage of Georgian and Zakkraikom officials, and many of the delegates symbolically removed their *chadra* and burned them.

The more complex reality

Following the uprising in March 1929, however, Party and GPU investigations into the causes of the incident revealed a much different picture of how these campaigns had actually unfolded in Upper Ajara. While Party leaders intended the campaigns to be proceeded by “educational and explanatory work,” this was not successfully communicated to local officials: “It was essential to study the directives of the Party on the removal of the *chadra* and then implement it, but explanatory work was absent, thanks to which we did not understand the essence of the directive,” reported one Party member in Khulo.¹⁴ Local officials called meetings and conducted school closings through threats of violence and arrests, or what Party investigators referred to as “administrative pressure” (*administrativnyi nazhim*). “When the campaign was being conducted, the comrades sent to the villages lacked instructions and each of them did whatever they felt like and they were unable to answer questions when asked,” reported another.¹⁵ Women in reality did not come to the pre-election meetings voluntarily, and in several places they boycotted them altogether.¹⁶ The weather in December in Upper Ajara was inclement, and according to reports in some places there were two meters of snow and blizzard conditions. “During the course of 20 days three women’s meetings were held in such conditions . . . the women had to come sometimes from tens of versts away and were dressed lightly in tattered clothes and shoes.”¹⁷ The police (*militia*) were sent to enforce attendance, often arresting husbands, and in one case supposedly dragged a woman from her sickbed. In another case, Khulo district committee (UKom) secretary A. Kalandadze made the men stand waiting for several days and refused to start the meeting until the women appeared.¹⁸ “We threatened the peasants with revolvers during the general meetings and demanded that even sick women come to the meetings,” a Party member told an investigating commission, “each of us became a *chekist*, threatening arrest and shooting and so forth.”¹⁹ In one village a crowd of peasants came to a pre-election meeting armed with axes and vociferously demanded that the local Party members be removed. They were disarmed at gunpoint, and five were arrested. In all of the villages where the peasants showed up for the meetings

they were at best passive, and “in some places certain peasants could not hold back and declared that they want the *chadra* and the *madrasa* and demanded that they be left alone on these issues.”²⁰

In the village of Uchamba in Khulo District, a Party member witness claimed that District Committee Secretary Kalandadze told one of the women “Why do you wear 7 meters of underpants? Better to dress in the European style, it’ll cost you less,” which “clearly caused hostility among those gathered,”²¹ the report continued:

Analogous incidents took place throughout the district. The peasants were threatened with arrest if they did not bring their wives and daughters to the meetings, and the gathered women were threatened that their husbands would be arrested and shot if they did not remove the *chadra*. There were also some particular kinds of threats. In Gorzhomi district, for example, they said that if you do not remove the *chadra*, we will attach your houses to airplanes with wires and relocate them to Siberia.²²

In a different village, peasants were told they would be buried in a tunnel if they did not remove the *chadra*. At a meeting of Party and Komsomol members in Khulo in December 1928, Kalandadze supposedly stated that “In order to achieve the removal of the *chadra*, we will probably have to shoot about 15 people, otherwise the campaign won’t be successful.”²³

The closing of the *madrasas* was similarly confrontational: “we threatened the *khodzhi* and the mullahs with revolvers, shoving the barrels in their mouths.”²⁴ In the first week of January 1929, the clerics throughout Upper Ajara were forced under threat of arrest or execution to sign statements that they would cease all functions in the *madrasa* within a certain number of days, and at the public meetings “they were mercilessly humiliated, called liars, parasites, and swindlers of the people, and the *madrasas* were characterized in this way as well.”²⁵

Subsequent investigations also revealed that the Congress of Ajaran Women held in Batumi in February 1929 had not proceeded entirely as smoothly as had been previously reported. Although the delegates participated largely of their own will,²⁶ the conditions under which they were sent caused both resentment and the spread of rumors. Husbands demanded to go with their wives, but were refused transportation for lack of resources. Rumors circulated (on the initiative of clerics, kulaks, and contrabandists), according to one Party report, that the women would be raped in Batumi or “exchanged for Russian women.”²⁷ Another Party report referred to the Congress as “a sham, at which there were few genuine Ajaran women, the majority were old ladies who didn’t cover their faces anyway, just people for show (*podstavnye litsa*).”²⁸ The Muslim peasant women who came from upper Ajara had been deceived, told they would be given clothing, shoes, and money and that the sick would receive medical assistance. “These fantastic promises remained unfulfilled and many of the women did not understand what was going on even up to the moment they returned home.” It was true that some of the women stepped forward of their own volition to burn their *chadras*, “which made a big impression on the important guests from Tiflis.” But in fact these women did so only because they had been promised in return nice dresses and warm coats, which were not forthcoming, despite not having outer garments to replace the *chadras*. “Many of the women caught cold, got sick, and even died,” the report stated. “Even those Ajaran peasants who are sympathetic to the goal of emancipation of women were dissatisfied with this Congress, which they saw as some sort of mockery of Ajaran women.”²⁹ Most of the women apparently resumed wearing the *chadra* upon returning home, in any case.³⁰

Key events that came to light in subsequent investigations, and that were also ignored in the initial reporting, were the *bab’i bunty* (women’s riots) that took place in upper Ajara in

early January 1929. In the village of Did-Ajara, women began gathering on 6 January to protest against the Soviet school. A group of 50–60 women armed with clubs were reported to have approached the school with shouts and threats “and with the goal of destruction,” but the local teacher “was able to prevent excesses.” The next day, on 7 January, approximately 100 women armed with sticks and clubs allegedly ransacked the local Soviet school in the village of Paksadzeebi, destroying books and posters and attempting to beat up the teacher, who was able to escape through a window.³¹ The women were reported to have particularly targeted the “Down with the Chadra” banners during their rampage.³² As was typical with such “women’s riots” of the time (see Viola 1986, 1996), the leadership assumed that the ringleaders of such actions must be men. District Party officials arrived on the scene the following day on 8 January and held a meeting of local Party and Komsomol activists. “Our intent was not to conceal the incident,” Khulo district head Kalandadze later claimed, “but to ‘unmask it as an uprising of the kulaks and *khodzhi* and other anti-Soviet elements.’”³³ Twenty to 25 men had already been arrested, and Kalandadze arrested 18 more. When the officials attempted to hold a meeting with the peasantry, however, “we had a confrontation on an even larger scale than the attack on the Soviet school.”³⁴ Despite a snowstorm, more than 600 peasants turned out and shouted down the speakers. One peasant shouted that “Soviet power wants to Christianize the Ajarans, and by closing the *madrasa* they are in fact taking away the Muslim religion, soon they will close the mosques as well.” The officials were forced to terminate the meeting, and “we decided that we have to arrest the most active of those present and hold the meeting again.” Fourteen further peasants were arrested over the next two days, and after that “the peasants supported the activities of Soviet power for raising the cultural level of the Ajaran masses.”³⁵ Forty to 45 more people were arrested in other villages of the district where the leadership feared more attacks on schools might take place.³⁶ Kalandadze organized a “troika” to expose those guilty of provoking and organizing the school attacks. “We told the peasants ‘This is a court, if you tell us the truth we’ll let you go, if not you will be shot,’ so they began to talk.”³⁷ Kalandadze denied peasants’ claims that he had stuck a revolver in people’s mouths, insisting instead that “during the hearing the revolvers were lying on the table.”³⁸ Twenty of those arrested were sent to Batumi for further investigation, and none of the women who participated in the events were questioned or detained. These “women’s riots” were seen by later investigators as indicative of the growing tension in Upper Ajara, the seriousness of which was not understood by the local leadership and not reported properly to the center: “As the result of agitation by the mullahs there was commotion among the women, which found expression in their uprising against Soviet schools. The *bab’i bunt*y were entirely symptomatic, and gave a signal of the danger, but officials paid no attention to this and the center, it seems, was not even properly informed about these events.”³⁹ As the Georgian Central Committee investigating commission concluded:

On 6 January 1929 an extraordinary and indicative thing took place: a group of women broke into a Soviet school and staged a ‘pogrom’ . . . Then the Obkom sends a commission to regulate the situation . . . to carry out arrests and so forth, but did not order that the cause of the incident be explained or examine how deep the causes were. The commission arrested more than 50 people and was satisfied with this. The attack was labeled a provocation of the kulaks, as if the poor and middle peasants were against the attack. This attack was a signal for the March uprising. [Despite this signal] Comrade Pantskhava sends a telegram to the ZKK and Georgian Central Committee that can only be summarized as ‘Let the Thunder of Victory Sound!’ (*Grom pobedy razdavaisia!*). He reports that the ground for a decree on the removal of the *chadra* is prepared, when the facts say the opposite.⁴⁰

Local cadres and local initiatives

Subsequent investigations paid much attention to the insufficiencies of the local cadres in Ajara at various levels. “The majority of Communist Party and Komsomol members” in Upper Ajara in their intellectual and political sophistication “are not at all distinguishable from the rest of the peasants,” the Georgian Central Committee investigating commission stated.⁴¹ According to Lavrentii Beria’s GPU report of April 1929, “the level of development of most of the village Party and Komsomol members is extremely low. They are not only incapable of explaining anything to the masses or of having a Communist influence on them, but thanks to their ignorance they themselves fall under the influence of the *khodzhi* and mullahs, wallowing in religious stagnation and petty everyday squabbles . . . [everything indicates that] the behavior of a significant part of the Party and Komosmol members during the supremely important campaign for re-elections to the Soviets and the struggle with religious–everyday stagnation (removal of the *chadra*, closing the *madrassa*) was one of the main causes for the eruption of the revolt.”⁴²

There were 54 full and candidate Party members in the Khulo district in the spring of 1929, and 95 percent of them were local Ajarans.⁴³ The investigations found that local party officials were either ignorant and incompetent, completely passive, or had compromised pasts, and sometimes they were all three simultaneously.⁴⁴ Only a handful of Party members were active, especially the leaders; Khulo District Committee head Kalandadze and Executive Committee head Riza Khozrevanidze, who came under particular criticism. Most other party members “wavered and were passive, many of them were against the removal of the *chadra* and other activities.”⁴⁵ The secretaries of the local Komsomol and trade union “were the most passive of all, and only went along with the Party line reluctantly.”⁴⁶ Many members themselves did not compel or allow their female relatives to remove their *chadras*, and were observed attending mosques and prayer services themselves.⁴⁷ Not a single Ajaran Party member is an expert in anything, the commission report observed, and among the Soviet *aktiv* “there are many with dark pasts, policemen and bandits.”⁴⁸

The Party and GPU analyses both emphasized the particular history of governance in Upper Ajara in the first decade of Soviet power. Up until 1927, they claimed, the region continued to be ruled in a feudal fashion by the previous aristocrats, or *beks*, of the Khimshiashvili (Khimshiev) family. “Not a single Ajaran who could serve was forgotten,” as the Khimshiashvili clients functioned as a kind of local police and informal constables. During the “period of reaction” after the 1905 revolution, companies of Ajarans under the leadership of their *beks* were sent to different parts of the Transcaucasus and Georgia to “suppress the revolutionary movement, and in the current reality many such people remain in our district.”⁴⁹ Although the Khimshiashvili family was in exile across the border in Turkey (and the GPU argued that they still held influence in Upper Ajara and were instrumental in provoking peasant discontent and the March uprising), their former “constables” (*strazhniki*) remained in place in respected positions in society and even in the state apparatus. According to Beria’s April GPU report, the local Party leadership “relied on certain ‘popular’ individuals,” usually kulaks, clerics, and other “anti-Soviet” elements.⁵⁰ Officials supposedly said “As long as Abdul Takidze is in Chvani I can rest calmly about the Chvani district,” while “this very ‘pillar of calmness’ was one of the organizers of the uprising” who took the regional Party leadership hostage.⁵¹ Party leaders often cooperated with the *khodzhi*, making use of their authority in society to help the peasantry to accept policies, such as encouraging them to set an example by purchasing state obligations.⁵² During the uprising, a number of local Party members publicly destroyed their

Party cards, and in one village the chairman of the Executive Committee became an active leader of the uprising.⁵³

Thus the direct blame for the occurrence of the March uprisings in both the Party and GPU reports was placed on the incompetence and mistakes of the local Party leaders: "The Party leadership of the district, in the person of District Committee secretary Comrade Kalandadze in these issues committed a crucial and outrageous overreach, which turned systematically into purely administrative pressing" reported Beria:

The line taken by the District Committee secretary was subsequently 'deepened' by other Party workers of the district, and therefore the short-term arrests, threats and violence often accompanied the campaign for the removal of the *chadra* and closing the *madrassa*. All of this naturally caused both concealed and open dissatisfaction among the peasant masses, deepened even further by the fact that the Party and Komsomol members did not undertake that which they themselves were implementing.⁵⁴

Local cadres were thus blamed for going too far in implementing the *chadra* ban, attempting to extend it beyond Party, Komsomol, and trade union members and state employees to the peasantry at large, and of using "purely administrative means" – threats and arrests – for de-veiling and closing the religious school rather than persuasion and "political education," which aggravated the peasants (and especially the crucial "poor" and "middle" peasant "layers" upon which the regime counted on for support in the countryside) and made them vulnerable to manipulation by anti-Soviet elements. Even beyond this, in their attempt to make the population (and perhaps their own subordinates) comply with their goals, the local Party leadership went out of their way to denigrate Islam and publically humiliate the clergy. Komsomol members told the investigating commission that Khozveranidze and Kalandadze instructed them to steal goats and drive them into the mullahs' pens, and then to arrange to search for and "discover" the stolen goats in order to discredit the clergy. They were also instructed to offer cigarettes, candy, and other food to peasants observing the Ramadan fast and to demonstratively organize debauches during the fast "in order to show the pointlessness of fasts and of religious belief in general."⁵⁵ According to several reports, at one point during the campaigns Komsomol members put a manikin of a mullah on a donkey and led it around the mosque in Khulo. They then took a goat up to the top of the minaret and forced it to squeal in imitation of the call to prayer, which angered the peasants to such an extent that they tried to attack the Komsomol members.⁵⁶

The investigating committee questioned the rank and file local Party and Komsomol members in the Khulo district and included their statements in its report (without indicating their specific identities). These cadres also attributed the blame for the uprising on the district-level leadership of Kalandadze and Khozveranidze. Those leaders failed to conduct the necessary explanatory work before the campaigns were implemented, and they were sent to the villages without proper instructions and were unable to answer questions, while Kalandadze and Khozveranidze themselves would not go to the more distant villages. The members repeated familiar claims about the leadership threatening the peasants and addressing them rudely, and added that they behaved in a similar fashion towards Party and Komsomol members, sometimes in the presence of the peasants, undermining their trust and authority among the peasantry. Kalandadze threatened them repeatedly with exclusion from the Party "even though he had no authority to do so, and we threatened others in turn." Further, the Party and Komsomol members understood that these actions were creating dissatisfaction among the peasants, that "because of this non-comradely approach many from the healthy elements became completely disillusioned with us, the Party, and the Komsomol." When the leaders spoke publicly about Soviet power in the district, "they always say that 'we are in charge here,' that is, Kalandadze and Khozveranidze." Those

two also prevented their subordinates from reporting on the mood of the peasantry: “we did not speak about the bungling (*golovotiapstvo*) that took place in the district because we feared that [Kalandadze and Khozrevanidze] would brand us as intriguers, because it was a mass phenomenon and also because it was risky to bring anything up against them, since they enjoyed trust and authority in the center.”⁵⁷

Kalandadze and Khozrevanidze had the opportunity to express their own point of view, albeit after they had been removed from their positions, in a statement to the Georgian Central Committee investigative commission dated 28 April 1929, written by Kalandadze and signed by both of them. They emphasized that they were following instructions from above. If mistakes were made and excessive pressure brought to bear, then they admitted their guilt, but they insisted that those at the other levels of leadership were guilty as well: “I declare that all the responsible officials were aware of the methods used and of what was going on, including the Secretary of the [Ajaran] Obkom and the chairman of the GPU.”⁵⁸ They denied using violent means for removing the *chadra* or for bringing women to the Congress of Ajaran Women in Batumi:

[in Upper Ajara] if you touch the *chadra* or use any violence the peasants will kill you on the spot, we could not even sway the Communists and Komsomol and trade union members, let alone non-Party members. Since we could not implement the directives we had on Party members, how could we allow violence on non-members? This I consider absolutely impermissible and I declare that this is slander toward us.⁵⁹

They complained that a number of suspicious individuals whom they had previously arrested were released from prison, despite appeals to the central leadership to keep them locked up, and that requests to have certain repeat offenders deported from the region went similarly unheeded. Worse, some of these individuals enjoyed the patronage protection of Obkom officials. Most importantly, they pointed out that while it was convenient for everybody – the peasants, the local Party members, and the Obkom and Republican officials – to blame the “small officials” at the district level, this was unfair:

In conclusion I want to say the following: I do not say that I am right and I do not demand exoneration. I only want to say that, besides Kalandadze and Khozrevanidze, other comrades were involved in this issue . . . In my narrow conception, Ajaristan is on the border and exposed to many anti-Soviet elements. Therefore it is essential that individuals not use the Party line for the gains of their personal groupings (*dlia lichnykh gruppirovok*) and for creating cadres of their own people who are no longer useful to anybody. If we were mistaken, then punish all the comrades involved . . . Everybody is also guilty in that which was carried out in the regions according to the directives and orders [from Batumi] . . . when things went bad they say you, lower level officials, are guilty, and not those in high posts.⁶⁰

Evaluations of the mid-level leadership, that of the Ajaran Autonomous Republic, were complicated by the situation involving the Ajaran Council of People’s Commissars (*Sov-narkom*) chairman Memed Gogiberidze. Arriving in Khulo at the start of the uprising, Gogiberidze was among the group of top Ajaran leaders taken hostage. While in captivity he agreed to send a letter to the Georgian Central Committee, in which he demanded “do not deploy troops; the peasants are demanding that the Khulo and Chvani executive committees be brought to trial, that the edict of the local authorities on the removal of the *chadra* and closing of the *madrasa* be annulled, and that representatives of the higher authorities, particularly Comrade Rykov, come here.” In addition to passing along the demands of his captors, Gogiberidze included his own assessment of the causes of the uprising: “In closing all of this, I must inform you that mistakes have been made by the local organs, undoubtedly there were excesses and roughshod implementation of various directives, but such a serious uprising cannot be explained only by the *chadra* or the *madrasa*, something deeper is at

play here.”⁶¹ More ominously, at one point in his captivity Gogiberidze agreed to make a public speech in front of the mosque in Khulo before a crowd of several thousand peasants. In his own retelling, Gogiberidze claimed that he and his comrades feared for their lives and that he merely intended to mollify the rebels by pointing out that his own brother had been classified as a kulak and denied the right to vote. The Ajaran republican prosecutor, a fellow hostage with Gogiberidze, gave a supposedly verbatim transcript of what Gogiberidze said that was included in Beria’s 13 March 1929 GPU report, in which the Ajaran Sovnarkom head criticized the local Party leadership and their interpretation of the Party line:

This is all the fault of the irresponsible local officials. I know that that your uprising is the uprising of the entire Ajaristan peasantry, and you absolutely have certain grounds for dissatisfaction: the closing of the *madrasa*, the removal of the chadra, the pressure on certain honest peasants, mandatory insurance on possessions and other things, and all of these issues caused your discontent and should be corrected. But do not think that the Communist Party and Soviet power agrees with the policies that we carried out in Ajaristan. I just returned from Moscow, where I saw Rykov, Kalinin, Stalin and Orjonikidze, who stated that the policy of the Party on these questions is incorrect and must be changed. As I said, I was against these activities from the very beginning, but nobody listened to me. In the upcoming days we will receive an edict on the cancellation of all of these activities.⁶²

At a later meeting at the Executive Committee building in the village of Duz-Chvana, Gogiberidze appealed to the leaders of the uprising in front of all of the hostages and told them that “Before raising a rebellion against Russia, you should send delegates to Turkey and to [the other local districts] to get their support, and after this perhaps I myself will stand shoulder-to-shoulder and fight with you, to fix the border at the Choloki river and declare the independence of Ajaristan.”⁶³ He then advised them that “you should consider well that Turkey and Russia are allies, and it is essential to find out if Turkey will agree to support you.”⁶⁴

Economic issues and peasant grievances

Beria’s secret police reports in March and April devoted much attention to the economic grievances of the Muslim peasantry in Upper Ajara in the period leading up to the revolt. The shortage of arable land in the region meant that the peasants depended primarily on animal husbandry and lumber. Up until 1926–1927 the peasants could use open land in Ajaristan for pasturing for free, and during the summers would drive their animals to the Turkish side of the border for additional pasturing. Crossing the border was no longer possible, and the peasants were now required to pay a small but crippling tax per head for pasturing.⁶⁵ Worse, where the peasants were previously able to forage for wood in the forests for heating and building, now this was subject to fee payments as well. The widespread impoverishment of the Ajaran peasantry led to the growth of contraband, Beria pointed out. Because of the desperation of the peasants, even the use of repressive measures was unable to stamp out this activity.⁶⁶ What was worse, the agricultural tax obligation of the peasants in the two years since 1927 had increased dramatically and in unpredictable ways. “The agricultural tax, while not occupying a dominant position in the sum total of peasant dissatisfaction leading to the uprising in the Khulo region, nevertheless is always present in the conversations and demands of the peasant rebels,” Beria observed.⁶⁷ Much more dissatisfaction, he argued, was caused by the mandatory state insurance of livestock:

“Being implemented without sufficient preparation, it is little understood by the uneducated peasant and leads to constant talk and condemnation of the organs of power.” This mandatory insurance cost the peasants even more than the agricultural tax, and it had recently increased in a similar fashion.⁶⁸ Worse still, apparent corruption in the payout system caused the peasants’

claims to go unfulfilled following flooding the previous year. The Georgian Central Committee report also drew attention to the peasants' frustration with the absence of manufactured goods for the peasants to buy, despite high demand.⁶⁹

While the GPU and Party reports thus paid attention to the economic origins of the peasant unrest, there was disagreement about the relative causal importance of those factors. ORK head Varo Japaridze commented that these economic issues were crucial, as 23 of the 25 points in the Georgian Central Committee Resolution based on the investigative commission's report related to these, while only two points concerned issues of the removal of the *chadra*.⁷⁰ The *chadra*, in her opinion, "was not the cause of the rebellion, but only the pretext to express dissatisfaction on economic grounds."⁷¹ Echoing Beria's GPU reports, however, the Central Committee's commission report viewed the economic and cultural grievances as layered and interrelated:

Based on extensive discussions with peasants and examination of the materials, the Commission came to the following conclusion: the cause of the uprising was not so much the economic demands of wide layers of the peasantry (the poor and middle peasants) as the religious-every-day life issues. We say "not so much" because dissatisfaction on economic grounds was real, but it related mostly to specific errors that did not have great significance for the mass of the poor and middle peasants. In any case, such a movement could not have arisen on these grounds alone. The main, chief, and dominating causes therefore were the issues of religion and daily life.⁷²

The Party and the GPU analyses both reached the conclusion that the aggressive implementation of the removal of the *chadra* and the closing of the *madrasa*, together with combining these projects with the election campaign and the antagonistic actions to insult Islam and humiliate the clergy drove the peasants beyond the boundary of what they could tolerate. More specifically, these actions were so belligerent that they overcame the presumed class distinctions in the Ajaran countryside and alienated the poor and middle peasants, making them susceptible to the agitation of the kulaks and clergy against the Party and state (and presumably their own inherent class interests): "class struggle [in the Ajaran countryside] lost its concrete content . . . and gave way to an uprising of solidarity."⁷³ In this way, these issues, and particularly the *chadra*, became symbolic causes of the uprising: "the *chadra* has become a banner of struggle of the kulak and the clergy." Thus the two underlying motives, the religious and the economic, "are so interwoven in the conditions of the Ajaran countryside that they created the bases for the joint uprisings of the various layers of the peasantry."⁷⁴ Some of the peasant elders who became leaders of the rebellion had earlier supported the idea of the removal of the *chadra* and the "emancipation" of women, yet the combination of factors and the sense of insult and desperation turned them against the Party. "The main thing isn't the *chadra*, and it's not the *madrasa*. They don't give us, progressive people, the possibility to participate, they deny us a voice and oppress us with unjust force," stated one participant.⁷⁵ The testimony of another was cited at length in the GPU report:

The cause of the rebellion was the Party. The fact that they forced our wives and daughters to remove the *chadra*, that everybody disregarded our faith and our wishes, that they always use violence towards us. We are a backwards people, a peasant one, we do not want others to interfere in our lives and our beliefs with brute force. Most of all, the issue of the *chadra* played the primary role. The campaign to remove the *chadra* was conducted violently . . . The women cried and sobbed, but they gave in to violence. Of course, the Communists of our villages and the local authorities are to blame for all of this. Why did they decide to close the *madrasa* here, while in other places of the Soviet Union, like in Azerbaijan for example, the Muslims freely perform their religious rituals. We cannot turn our backs on our faith and traditions, in this case on the *madrasa* and the wearing of the *chadra*. . . representatives of the

Party organization and the local authorities directly terrorize the population with their demands. Recently they stated that . . . the peasants will work collectively and live that way also. The government states all of these things in categorical form, demanding their fulfillment, but a Muslim cannot accept these reforms. They contradict his religious convictions. . . . All of these truly intolerable conditions forced the peasants of the Khulo district to revolt against the government, they could stand no more.⁷⁶

Another Ajaran source cited in a police report, this time an inspector at an oil refinery plant in Batumi, also emphasized that the Muslim peasants simply reached a breaking point:

They brought our women to Batumi by force and removed their *chadra*, and the Ajarans kept quiet; they closed the spiritual schools, and they also kept quiet; on Women's Day [8 March] they again wanted to bring the women to Batumi, but the Ajarans didn't let them go. Then the Komsomol members sat the mullah scarecrow on a donkey [and used a goat to imitate the call to prayer] and this the Ajarans could not endure; the Ajarans will never give in, they will never forgive this.⁷⁷

Ethnicity and Ajaran Muslim identity

In later conceptions of Georgian national identity, Ajarans are indisputably considered to be one of the core constituent groups comprising the Georgian nation, distinct from other Georgians only by historical legacies of Islamicization (and even this difference is played down by contemporary Georgian politicians and intellectuals – see Pelkmans 2002, 2006). Prior to the 20th century, Ajarans were called Muslim Georgians or just Muslims, and they appeared as a distinct ethnic category in the USSR census of 1926 (Hoch and Kopeček 2011, 3). In 1937, while First Secretary of the Georgian Party Central Committee, Beria appealed to Stalin to have the Ajarans classified as part of the Georgian nationality in the *Slovar' natsional'nostei* (Dictionary of Nationalities) in preparation for the 1937 census, citing the findings of the Georgian Academy of Sciences that “detaching the Ajarans as a separate nationality and distinguishing them from the Georgian nationality in its root contradicts the Stalinist definition of the concept of nation” (Guruli and Tushurashvili 2008, 108–109). In the USSR census of 1939 and afterwards, Ajarans were incorporated into the Georgian category, yet in the appeals and secret police reports of statements from Ajara at the time, it seems that there was a significant amount of inter-ethnic tension between the Upper Ajaran Muslims and other Georgians, and that these differences were perceived in ethnic terms. The Muslim peasants in Ajaristan in 1929 clearly seemed to associate the local Communist leadership and the hardships that they were imposing as coming from the Georgians. Among the repeated demands made throughout the uprising were “the removal of all Georgians and Communists from Upper Ajaristan” and that the Georgian language should not be taught in schools, and replaced instead with Russian or Turkish.⁷⁸ In their reports on the uprising, Georgian officials regularly refer to the Ajarans as “backwards” and underdeveloped, such as in this report of 22 April 1929 by political officer Inasaridze: “I should observe that the population of the Khulo district, thanks to its economic backwardness and its darkness (*temnota*) and geographical isolation, is extremely fanatical.”⁷⁹

The Georgian Central Committee investigating commission found that prejudice on the part of Georgian Party officials led to reluctance to incorporate Ajarans into the Party and state structure: “everywhere in our apparatuses there sit (alien to us) nationalist–chauvinist elements who see Ajarans as a lower race, who call them ‘Indians’ (*indeitsy*) . . . such an orientation is even found among highly placed officials and members of the Party, that ‘these bastards (*svolochi*) cannot be trusted.’” This overt chauvinism, the commission concluded, obstructed “the task of incorporating Ajarans in institutions and enterprises, and the

creation from them of cadres of workers is advancing at a snail's place, and it also explains the anti-Georgian sentiment of the population . . . who see the removal of the *chadra* and the closing of the *madrassa* as conducted by the hands of the Georgians."⁸⁰ This anti-Georgian mood, the commission held, "is to a significant degree a reaction to Georgian chauvinism."⁸¹ According to the secret police reports, "anti-Ajaran" moods continued to be observed among ethnic Georgian workers in Batumi, "having in the majority of cases a sharply expressed 'great-power' (*velikoderzhavnicheskii*) tone that sounds contemptuous 'of those savages.'"⁸² Some workers were quoted as saying "General Liakhov was correct when he wanted to wipe out the Ajarans, those scum, those eternally ungrateful swine, and resettle the whole area with Cossacks, Liakhov had the right idea, but they obstructed him."⁸³ These wild birds will never be satisfied."⁸⁴

Indeed, the relations between Ajaran and Georgian workers in Batumi were seen to be worsening as a result of the uprising in Upper Ajara, "expressed in the form of national hatred, mutual insults and threats." The Georgian workers considered the Ajarans to be ungrateful for all they had received under Soviet power, while the Ajarans felt belittled and under threat of assimilation. A Georgian stoker, for example, told an informant "Why are they paying attention to those Ajaran bastards? They should have beaten them, and this would have been over very soon. Enough of coddling them, like children."⁸⁵ As one Ajaran Komsomol member and apprentice metalworker told the GPU, "The Georgians are responsible for all of this, they could have come to the backwards Ajaran and encourage him to remove the *chadra* himself, but they had to do it violently . . . in general the Georgians are just sellouts, always looking here and there."⁸⁶ Another Ajaran in Batumi, an unskilled laborer and Communist Party member "who enjoys great authority among Ajarans," was quoted as saying:

Why are they forcing us not to believe in God? Let the young go to school, but don't touch the old men. After all the government drove the Ajarans to rebellion, and now it will be worse. Now feuds will begin among the Ajarans themselves, they will beat one another. The Communists and our leaders, and especially the Georgians, are to blame for this, it is because of them that all of this happened.⁸⁷

The Georgian officials were distressed by the ways in which the Ajarans attempted to appeal over the heads of the Georgian leadership to Moscow and to Russians, which they referred to as the "Moscow orientation" of the Ajaran peasants. In addition to demands for Georgian officials to be removed from the region and for Russian to replace Georgian in schools, other demands made during the uprising included appeals for intervention to Alexei Ivanovich Rykov, then the Chairman of the USSR Council of People's Commissars, and even for the direct subordination of Ajaristan to Moscow rather than to the Georgian SSR or the TSFSR.⁸⁸ The rebel leaders during the uprising supposedly intended to make their way through to Moscow with their demands and grievances, and even after fleeing to Turkey, there were reports that they still desired to appeal to Moscow.⁸⁹ Several Ajaran workers were reported by the GPU as saying "Things will be worse if the Georgians start to touch our traditions and our women again; the Georgians want to make us Muslims into Georgians, but we don't want to be subordinate to them. We recognize only Moscow as the center. Sooner or later we will again raise a rebellion and drive out the Georgians completely. We Ajarans will show them what it means to offend us."⁹⁰ "It was a shame that Russian Red Army soldiers were killed [during the uprising]," an Ajaran worker told the GPU, "they weren't guilty of anything."⁹¹

A curious aspect of this relationship between the Ajaran Muslims and other Georgians was that despite the omnipresent rhetoric, slogans, and images of Bolshevism, Marxist-Leninism, and Socialism in the public sphere at that time, at least some of the peasants

in Upper Ajara seemed to view the motives of the local leadership as a continuing project of Georgification, but one that involved Christianization. They felt that the Georgian center was once again, as in the “golden age of nationalism” of the recent past (the late 19th and early 20th centuries), trying to make them “properly” Georgian by stripping away the religious identity that gave them their uniqueness. Peasants who took over an official meeting in the town of Riketi on 8 January 1929, two months before the uprising, said that “Soviet power wants to Christianize the Ajarans, and by closing the *madrassa* they are in fact taking away the Muslim religion, and soon they will close the mosques as well.”⁹² A mullah in Khulo, addressing a crowd of more than 2000 and also the kidnapped Ajaran Party leaders in early March, stated that “For eight years they pressed and oppressed us, we had no freedom, we were languishing. Today the sun has come out, we have been liberated from the Christians who took away our faith, our mosque, who removed the *chadra* and closed the *madrassa*, who want to close the *mektebe*, to baptize us and make us infidels.”⁹³ Party analysts also thought that by crudely closing religious schools “the comrades were simply confused and gave fodder for the provocateurs – ‘You see, they are closing the *mektebe*, it means that they will now open Christian schools.’”⁹⁴

Apportioning blame and seeking understanding

In the case of Ajaristan and the entire Transcaucasus as a whole, there does not seem to have been any rhetoric in Party ideology about women as a “substitute proletariat,” and ultimately the role of gender in the case of the 1929 uprising was somewhat secondary in comparison with the earlier de-veiling campaigns in Central Asia. Women were not without agency in this case, however. It was the ORK leadership that put the issue of the *chadra* on the agenda in the Zakkraikom from the start and pressed for the removal campaign. Peasant women played a crucial role in articulating demands early on, through their speeches at the formal election meetings and by sometimes boycotting those meetings, and through their statements to the secret police and the Party investigatory commission. The women’s uprisings against the Soviet schools in two villages in January 1929 were also a watershed event that signaled both the peasants’ desperation and their radicalization.

The analyses of the Party and GPU agreed that the key causal factor behind the March 1929 uprising in Upper Ajara was the aggressive actions of the local leadership in implementing the campaigns to remove the *chadra* and close the *madrassa* forcefully and without preparatory activities and on a scale that went beyond the limited categories that the central leadership had in mind (extending the removal of the *chadra* beyond relatives of Party and Komsomol members and state and trade union employees to the female population writ large). These forceful “administrative means” allowed “anti-Soviet elements,” including the Muslim clerics, to make use of the symbolic power of the *madrassa* and the *chadra* to amalgamate other grievances and to provoke the peasants to unified action against the Soviet regime. As Northrop (2004) found in Central Asia, in Ajara as well the Soviet, assault on these traditions only increased the attachment to them as symbols of national identity and cultural authenticity.⁹⁵ Everybody, from the central authorities in Tiflis to the peasants and local Party rank and file, placed the blame for this on the local Party officials at the District Committee level. The District Committee leaders admitted themselves that they “did not sufficiently take into consideration the mood of the peasants, we allowed administrative methods to take precedence, and we blindly got caught up by certain achievements and lost sight of what was most important.”⁹⁶ Yet they also argued that they should not be alone in sharing the blame, and that they were being unfairly scapegoated from both above and below.

Several observers at the time criticized this convenient blaming of the “small officials.” OPK head Varo Djaparidze criticized the ZKK and Georgian Party Central Committees for excluding the OPK from the implementation of the *chadra* policies on the ground and entrusting them entirely to the unprepared local officials.⁹⁷ An Azerbaijani Zakkraikom official, Sait Kadyrov, passing through on the way to conduct an inspection of the Abkhazian SSR, was present at the Party plenary discussions of the Ajaristan issue in Tiflis in April 1929, and his notes are preserved in the Zakkraikom file on the events. Kadyrov was skeptical of the significance of the *chadra*, and also of the apportionment of blame on the local officials:

I think that the recent events in Ajaristan are the consequence not only of too hasty measures for the removal of the *chadra* or the struggle with the clergy. On the way to Abkhazia I was in Ajaristan and visited the villages, spoke with Ajaran women and with some leading officials. I found that the ‘chadra’ was a secondary slogan for the rebels, that the removal of the *chadra* was not sufficiently serious as to cause a revolt in and of itself. In reality, in the villages in Ajaristan women go around in the same way as our [Azerbaijani women] in the village. Only city women wear the *chadra*, and in the villages they wear a shawl and scarves that barely cover their chin. The main thing isn’t the *chadra*, ... but that there was not enough attention paid to improving the situation of the Ajaran poor peasant.⁹⁸

Kadyrov argued that even after eight years of “Sovietization” in the region, the central authorities had devoted no resources to sustainable recruitment of local personnel in the region, and he accused Georgian Party First Secretary M. Kakhiani of failing to implement Leninist policies in such areas. Kadyrov therefore found Kakhiani’s criticism of the local officials in Upper Ajara to be hypocritical and shortsighted:

Later, Comrade Kakhiani accused the officials in Ajaristan of not taking into consideration the situation and the mood of the peasants, of using administrative means to close all the *madradas* immediately, but maybe he forgets that at a Party meeting in Batumi he himself stated that one of the main tasks of the Party is to intensify the struggle against the clergy, against kulak influence, against religion, that these tasks can be successfully fulfilled only if our organizations conclusively and decisively struggle against the kulak and religious influence.⁹⁹

When an Ajaran colleague attempted to remind Kakhiani of this speech, Kakhiani replied that he bore no responsibility for the fact that his subordinates in Upper Ajara actually did as he said, as “this was only a speech.” The other Georgian Party officials supported Kakhiani in this, “saying that no specific directives had been issued” to this effect, which Kadyrov described as “a bureaucratic setting of the question, mindless proceduralism (*kazenshchina*).”¹⁰⁰

This suggests an important causal factor to explain why the local Party leadership pressed forward with their aggressive policies, despite lack of specific instruction and despite the fact that the central authorities in Tiflis and especially in Moscow preferred a more moderate interpretation. The officials in both Tiflis and at ground level in Upper Ajaristan were under intense pressure to show strength before the peasantry and to act and report successes. Any signs of wavering or concession risked being seen as “rightist” in the current political climate. The motivations of the local Party officials were to implement the directives as they understood them, to assert their authority, and compel obedience from a skeptical and even hostile population, while at the same time demonstrating their loyalty and commitment to their patrons in Tiflis and Batumi and to protect themselves from accusations of faintheartedness, which might be politically construed as “right deviation.”

The local leadership was criticized for linking the *chadra* and *madrassa* campaign with the electoral campaign for the new Soviets. It is hard to imagine that they might have done otherwise, as the demands for successfully implementing both came at the same time (and

were themselves linked, as the delegates to the new Congress of Soviets were to pass the formal decree banning the *chadra*). As Jan Gross (2002) has argued, Soviet election campaigns in the Stalinist period were essentially a procedural method of control, to demonstrate the powerlessness and complicity of the population by compelling the people to vote in a clearly artificial simulation of democracy. The mandatory electoral meetings and voting days were expected to be the venues at which the regime would inform the population of its intentions and publicly compel compliance (in this case, through public removal of the *chadra*). Here the meetings gave public forums for the peasants, however, to defiantly express their anger at the regime's policies or to boycott and compel the regime to use more repressive means to attempt to enforce attendance.¹⁰¹

The higher level officials in Batumi and Tbilisi were similarly trying to understand the political currents, demonstrate their loyalty and effectiveness to the center, and preclude accusations of softness towards the peasantry. Yet this ultimately resulted in the formulation and implementation of policies that were entirely the reverse of the preferences of the central elites in Moscow. As can be seen from Stalin's immediate and forceful intervention as soon as he became aware of the uprising in early March 1929, the policies of de-veiling and *madrasa* closings were not at all what he intended. This case perhaps shows the limits of central control over the periphery by 1929, and also the room available for interpretation and implementation at the local level.

Ultimately, the Zakkraikom and the Georgian Party Central Committee backed down, and modified their policies towards the Muslim peasants. (Suny 1994, 247–248). Even while the uprising was still underway, the Zakkraikom cancelled the proposed publishing of the decree on the removal of the *chadra* and to categorically prohibit further “anti-religious work by methods of administrative pressure.”¹⁰² In the wake of the rebellion, the Party went out of its way to mollify the peasants, offering them credits, reductions in taxes, firewood gathering privileges, educational and employment opportunities, access to manufactured goods, increased funding for schools, promises that boys and girls would study separately, and free medical assistance.¹⁰³ Yet instead of increasing the authority of the Party, Beria argued in his 6 April report that the opposite was the case: “the peasants believe that precisely as the result of the uprising they succeeded in forcing the government to make concessions and that all of this help means only the weakness of the authorities in seeking to win over the Ajarans and to keep them from rising up again.”¹⁰⁴ The peasants in other regions of Ajara that remained calm during the uprising were beginning to express regret that they did not join the rebellion, “then they would have received much more manufactured goods and other products than they do now.”¹⁰⁵

The fact that the central leadership was willing to make such far-reaching concessions in the wake of the uprising is also striking, especially considering that this was taking place at the same time that the leadership was actively pursuing collectivization campaigns in other parts of the USSR to ruthlessly suppress the peasantry. As Viola (1996, 7) points out, the Party and state were “committed to remaking the peasantry, to eliminating it as an antiquated socioeconomic category in an accelerated depeasantization that would transform peasant into proletarian.” In the periphery (in the Soviet “East,” to use Terry Martin's (2001, ch. 4) analytical use of the Bolsheviks' own category of practice), the project of overcoming cultural backwardness was a central aspect of the centralization and utopianism of the “cultural revolution” that was reaching its zenith in precisely this period. Yet the symbolic nature of the *chadra* and of Islam more generally was perhaps useful for the Party leaders at various levels in this regard as well in practice, as it gave the regime a face-saving means to back down from forceful measures against the Muslim peasantry without danger of accusation of political deviation, once that they understood that

Moscow (and Stalin personally) preferred not to provoke Muslims, especially in such non-essential agricultural regions, and that this, for the time being, was considered the Party line. Ajara was not the only case where the regime tactically retreated from pursuing radical policies so as not to exacerbate the situation. As Northrop (2004, 283) notes of the de-veiling campaigns in Uzbekistan several years prior, “Even under Stalin, Soviet state power, acting through law and the courts, confronted serious limits in its efforts to govern, much less transform, its colonial Central Asian periphery.” The chaotic nature of the attempts to implement the Stalinist modernization program in practice necessitated alterations and compromise at the local level.

The case of the Ajaran uprising exemplifies certain limits on Stalin and Stalinism. By 1929 Stalin was in the final stages of consolidating power and his “revolutions from above” of crash industrialization and now agricultural collectivization were underway. Where it was of vital importance, in the grain-rich regions of Russia and Ukraine, Stalin was willing to fight the peasantry to the death. Neither Uzbekistan nor the Ajarian region had such significance. Stalin was not willing to risk wide-scale mutiny among Muslim peasants, in the border regions especially, for unnecessary reasons; after all, the wearing of the *chadra* did not fundamentally threaten the new political projects. The poor Muslim peasantry were supportive of Party economic policies of land redistribution; so Stalin did not intend such questions of culture and “everyday life” to become issues that could potentially ally poor and middle peasants with “class enemies” such as the kulaks and the Muslim clergy. Stalin was mostly likely enough of a Marxist to believe that change of the economic basis of society would by itself eventually lead to the transformation of everyday life and traditions. Thus, instead of confrontation, the regime chose accommodation.

Notes

1. Section II of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), formerly known as the Party Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia, or Partarkhiv TsK KPG), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 2.
2. From 1922–1936 the Georgian SSR was subordinated to the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, and the Georgian Party Central Committee to the Transcaucasian Regional Committee (Zakkraikom), previously called the “Kavbiuro.”
3. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 46.
4. For a comprehensive history, see Pelkmans 2006, chapter 4.
5. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 129.
6. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 196, l. 1).
7. On 30 January 1929 a decree on mandatory education was issued by the Ajaristan authorities. Due to confusion on their part about Islamic education, the decree included the closing of both Muslim religious schools (*madrasa*) and also secular school (*mektebe*), which contributed to the peasants' concerns that the Soviet schools were intended as a step towards Christianization. 14.4.301, p. 5.
8. From “Iz rezoliutsii otdela rabotnits i krest'ianok TsK VKP(b) po doklaku otdela rabotnits i krest'ianok StK KP(b) Gruzii,” *Izvestiia Tentral'nogo i Tiflisskogo komitetov Kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov) Gruzii*, October–November 1928, reprinted in Kuznetsova (1979, 160–162).
9. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 190.
10. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 139.
11. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 139.
12. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 168.
13. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 188.
14. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 118.
15. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 121.

16. Archives Administration of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara (ačaris avtonomiuri respublikis mt'avrobis sak'veucqebó dacesebuleba saark'ivo sammart'velo (aarmsdss), f. 1, op. 1, d. 894, l. 25.
17. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 4. A verst is about one kilometer.
18. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 187.
19. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 118.
20. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 191.
21. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 21.
22. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 22–3.
23. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 23.
24. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 119.
25. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 193.
26. According to an anonymous letter by “a group of Communists” addressed to ZKK First Secretary Krinitsky on 9 December 1929, in the village of Nagvarebi they refused to select delegates for the Congress. Local officials allegedly told them that those who refuse to send women to the Congress will be arrested for six months and fined 100 rubles. “This caused anger in the crowd, and they beat up three Communist officials,” the letter states. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 95.
27. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 188.
28. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 202.
29. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 203.
30. aarmsdss, f. 1, op. 1, d. 894, l. 24.
31. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 192.
32. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 150.
33. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131.
34. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131.
35. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131. l. 132.
36. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131, l. 192.
37. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131. l. 187.
38. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131. l. 187.
39. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 202.
40. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 25.
41. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 2 and 21.
42. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 134.
43. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 195; aarmsdss, f. 1, op. 1, d. 894, l. 30.
44. aarmsdss, f. 1, op. 1, d. 894, l. 31.
45. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 196.
46. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 196.
47. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 301.
48. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 196.
49. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 196.
50. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 27.
51. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 27.
52. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 27.
53. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 267.
54. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 6.
55. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 2.
56. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 181.
57. All of the quotations in this paragraph are from sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 118–21.
58. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 187.
59. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 188.
60. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 188–9.
61. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 98.
62. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 120.
63. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 211.
64. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 212.
65. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, ll. 129–30.

66. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 132.
67. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 132.
68. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 132.
69. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 197.
70. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 128.
71. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 130.
72. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 1.
73. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 24.
74. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 132.
75. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 265.
76. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, ll. 33–4.
77. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 181.
78. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 176. As Pelkmans (2006) has pointed out, education in Adjara in the pre-Soviet period stressed Turkish and Arabic (p. 105).
79. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 193.
80. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 33.
81. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 132.
82. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 177.
83. This is a reference to Vladimir Platonovich Lyakhov, a Tsarist and later White Army general active on the Caucasus front in the First World War and subsequent Russian Civil War.
84. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 177.
85. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 183.
86. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 182.
87. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 182.
88. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 176.
89. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 65.
90. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 179.
91. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 182.
92. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 131.
93. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 96.
94. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 26.
95. For a discussion of other cases in the colonized parts of the Arab world where similar phenomena took place, see Edgar (2003, 133, fn. 4).
96. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 133.
97. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 129–30.
98. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 250.
99. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 250.
100. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 250.
101. Perhaps paradoxically, one of the ways that the peasants expressed their anger in the wake of the uprising was to use official public meetings to demand the reinstatement of Memed Gogiberidze, the Ajaran Sovnarkom chairman who, to the enagement of the Party leadership and the GPU, had publicly addressed the crowd in conciliatory tones while a hostage of the rebels during the uprising (sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, l. 34).
102. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 47.
103. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 14, op. 4, d. 301, ll. 39–40.
104. sak'art'velos šss ark'ivi (II), f. 13, op. 7, d. 62, l. 259.
105. Ibid.

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