briefly mention that sensitive border minorities lacking neighboring Soviet kin republics (such as Talyshes and Kurds) were more likely to be targeted (181), however more space should have been devoted to this crucial issue. This within-case comparison could then have been complemented with a cross-national one as the author also touches upon the assimilation of Adjarans in Soviet Georgia and of Pamiris in Tajikistan (172–173). All this brings home the fact that often there is not a uniform state policy towards minorities. Indeed, the very same state can apply different ethnicity regimes to different minorities residing within its borders. Second, given the author's point that assimilation narratives in Azerbaijan persist to this day, and given the fact that the Russian Federation in itself has also moved in an assimilationist direction since the 1997 elimination of passport ethnicity, to what extent can we talk of a pattern of shifting from multi-ethnic to assimilationist regimes in post-Soviet countries? This is another related issue that deserves attention.

All in all, *Nested Nationalism* is an outstanding work providing a refreshing view of the "Affirmative Action Empire" from a hitherto overlooked perspective. It will be of interest primarily to historians and comparativists of ethnicity and nationalism and it is indispensable for understanding the current ethnic trajectories in the vast post-Soviet space.

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doi:10.1017/nps.2022.38

Mobilizing Uncertainty: Collective Identities and War in Abkazia, by Anastasia Shesterinina, Cornell University Press, 2021, 258 pp., $49.95 (hardcover), ISBN13: 9781501753763, ISBN10: 1501753762.

In *Mobilizing in Uncertainty,* Anastasia Shesterinina delves into the onset of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict to explore the variations in Abkhaz reactions to this calamity. Based on eight months of fieldwork and some 180 in-depth interviews, Shesterinina frames the conflict as a case study to test existing theories of escalation and mobilization – based on relative deprivation, collective action and material rewards, and strategic interaction – and finds them wanting. In conditions of heightened uncertainty, she found considerations of personal risk absent from her respondents' accounts. And contrary to what one might expect based on conflict escalation theories, some who had played active roles in earlier confrontations went into hiding or fled when the war began with a concerted Georgian invasion in August 1992, while others with little previous activist experience now took up arms. Despite a shared trajectory of grievances and of intensifying confrontations, individual Abkhaz were faced with a range of choices – from hiding or fleeing to supporting or participating in the fighting – driven by motivations far more complex than simple assessments of self-interest, economic incentives, or security maximization. Shesterinina instead posits a socio-historical approach to understanding reactions under uncertainty as the war began. These are based on "collective threat framing" through which perceptions are constructed from collective memory and disseminated through social trust networks to structure people's understanding of what constitutes threat, towards whom threat is directed, and of who is most in need of protection from the threat. This framework seems indeed useful in making sense of the continuum of responses on the part of Abkhaz actors at the start of the conflict, during the course of the war, and in the wake of the hostilities. At the same time, the author's compelling narrative about this little-studied conflict, told primarily from the Abkhaz perspective, adds

considerable nuance regarding how information was communicated and processed by individuals and communities.

Given the centrality of collective memory and history to this collective threat framing, considerable space is devoted to parsing the contentious historical narratives surrounding the conflict. Yet it is not entirely clear if the goal of this is to lay out a "subjective" Abkhaz perspective, or an "objective" recounting of the historical background, confusion compounded by a somewhat unreflective intermixing of recollections from interview subjects with quotations from (mostly but not always Abkhaz) secondary sources. This distinction is important because if the goal is the former (Abkhaz collective memory), then the interpretation is beyond critique except by the informants themselves; if the latter (an objective recounting), then the author's interpretation is subject to criticism. One such criticism would be the complete omission of the period of Abkhaz dominance during the reign of Nestor Lakoba in Abkhazia in the 1920s–1930s (the only mention of Lakoba is a passing and historically inaccurate quotation from a respondent). Lakoba himself is mythologized in Abkhaz historiography and popular memory as a kind of George Washington figure, and the Soviet Abkhazia of the period as an idyllic Acadia, making its destruction by Lavrenty Beria and his henchmen (and the apparent poisoning of Lakoba by Beria in 1936) all the more egregious and the starting point for the series of "Abkhaz letters" to the higher authorities in Moscow beginning from the following decade. Shesterinina's inclusion of the communications of Abkhazian *Revkom* Chairman Efrem Eshba in 1921 in this process of letter writing seems questionable, as these were not complaints but official dispatches to the center by the ranking Soviet official in Abkhazia at the time. One might also quibble with Shesterinina's account of the war's conclusion in July–September 1993: while she correctly emphasizes that Russia's involvement for much of the conflict was *ad hoc* and decentralized, with different branches of the Russian state backing different sides, there is a consensus that by the culmination of the war the Russian government had focused its efforts in support of the Abkhaz side in order to coerce Georgia into the CIS, and that direct Russian involvement (particularly air and artillery support) was decisive in the Abkhaz victory. Georgian subsequent ascension into the CIS also explains why Russia then backed sanctions against the victorious but now isolated Abkhaz later in the 1990s.

It seems to me as well that the significance of Soviet nationalities policy is underemphasized, particularly the ways in which it reified primordial ethnic categories and imbued zero-sum conceptions of both individual and territorial identity, complicating the emergence of overlapping ethnic identities and instilling the unquestioned conviction that one territory must "belong" only to one ethnic group. The Soviet attempt to depoliticize nationalism by conceding "formal" aspects of national identity had the paradoxical effect, in a fluid ethno-federal hierarchy, of turning such symbols into markers of political status that carried real-world implications; it is only in this context that the volatility of things like toponyms, the title of a university, the relative number of dance ensembles, etc. makes sense – why disputes over such seemingly trifling things came to be perceived in life-and-death terms, all the more so once the "escape valve" of appeal to Moscow seemed at risk of vanishing. None of these omissions, however, would necessarily undermine the author's argument about the centrality of collective threat framing; on the contrary, they might strengthen it.

It seems entirely reasonable that, given the extreme uncertainty of the situation, the respondents did not articulate their recollections in terms of risk calculations. Yet the argument that such calculations were absent or largely insignificant seems unsatisfying, a kind of "absence of evidence as evidence of absence." Even in situations of greater certainty one suspects that risk calculations are not always made consciously (especially in retrospective recollection; even less so in high "honor" cultures like the Caucasus), so that oral history interviews might not be the best method of eliciting them. In any case, certainly few would contest that such calculations in conditions of extreme uncertainty would be highly nuanced and far from black and white. *Mobilization in Uncertainty* offers a framework for teasing out such nuances in subjects' reactions and shows how oral history

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.36 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interviews can be put to use to test the assumptions derived from that framework, in a way that would provoke useful discussion in graduate-level fieldwork methodology courses in history and the social sciences. Ultimately understanding the motivations and choices of actions of the Abkhaz, as the defensive side in this conflict, might be the somewhat easier task; deciphering the collective threat framing that led the Georgians to launch this war may be both even more intriguing and more disturbing.

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doi:10.1017/nps.2022.36