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Mobilizing in Uncertainty: A Response to Caspersen, Driscoll, and Schatz

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SYMPOSIUM

Mobilizing in Uncertainty: A Response to Caspersen, Driscoll, and Schatz

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Mobilizing in Uncertainty is a product of a deep commitment to individuals whose lives have been marked by first-hand experiences of intergroup violence and war, to cumulative efforts across diverse disciplinary traditions to understand these experiences and their implications for social and political processes we study, and to methodologically rigorous research centered on the meanings that participants in these processes attribute to their reality and grounded insights that can emerge as a result. The contributors to the Symposium picked up on these foundations. Their commentaries highlight the challenging fieldwork and careful attention to the voices of ordinary people underlying this book and my openness about the design and process of research, including the changes that took place along the way. They also point out empirical and theoretical contributions of the book, identifying the reconstruction of events of Abkhaz mobilization in the context of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the war of 1992–1993 in particular, the interaction of prewar shared understandings of conflict and one's role in it and social networks at the time of mobilization, and the significance of uncertainty in mobilization for war as the pillars of the book that can have interdisciplinary purchase. I appreciate the generosity animating these commentaries.

Caspersen's, Driscoll's, and Schatz's critical engagement with the book also points to areas of clarification, discussion, and future research. I will begin by clarifying the purpose of the book, particularly in response to Driscoll's commentary. I will then turn to questions of 'ex-post' explanation raised by Caspersen and will conclude by accepting Schatz's invitation to think further about the generalizability and extensions of this research.

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The Purpose of the Book

Driscoll asks important questions about the nature of the Abkhaz case when viewed comparatively in the South Caucasus, the Georgian and Russian voices in the analysis, and the role of Russia in Abkhaz mobilization for war. These questions give me an opportunity to clarify the scope of the book.

The purpose of *Mobilizing in Uncertainty* is not to explain what accounts for the variation in the occurrence of wars across the former Soviet Union, particularly the South Caucasus, why the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 took place despite its foreseeable consequences that Georgian leaders failed to anticipate, as Driscoll suggests (Caspersen rightly points out that opportunities for deescalation also existed among dissenting voices in Abkhazia), or what the different perspectives on this war and the broader Georgian-Abkhaz conflict are. Answering these questions would require a different research design than that developed for this book. Important contributions have been made on each of these questions in the existing literature and the book engages with these contributions.¹ For example, the argument that Beissinger (2002, p. 222) makes on Abkhazia as an anomalous case in the region in his comparative study of nationalist mobilization at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse serves as a starting point for my research given that mobilization for war was not expected in this case and this offered the potential for theory building (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 20).

Instead, *Mobilizing* seeks to understand how a specific group involved in the war, which has rarely been a focus of ethnographic research on the conflict, namely, the ordinary Abkhaz, made sense of and navigated the situation they faced, reflecting the interpretivist foundations of this work that Schatz so sharply pins down in his commentary. Given this focus, the aim is not to disregard the Georgian or Russian voices. In fact, I sought these voices in archival, news, and secondary materials and 30 interviews and one focus group carried out with 37 Georgians displaced by the war, government officials, and experts in universities, think tanks, and nongovernmental organizations in Tbilisi and Moscow.² This fieldwork took place in 2013, after my research in Abkhazia, which helped me formulate some of my questions. My decision to conduct fieldwork, and present early findings, in Tbilisi and Moscow was generally met with support, to answer Schatz's question about access. For example, members of the government of Abkhazia in exile enabled my focus group with displaced Georgians. These materials are intertwined throughout the book.

The aim is to engage with these voices to the extent that they help contextualize Abkhaz perspectives on their *own* lived experiences of the war and the broader conflict. To illustrate, the theme of prewar intergroup familial and friendship ties that Abkhaz respondents consistently bring up also appears in recollections of displaced Georgians I spoke with in Tbilisi and sheds light on the diverse but relatively integrated social setting in which the ordinary Abkhaz lived, challenging blanket statements about everlasting antagonism between these groups (Shesterinina, 2021, pp. 90–91). I, therefore, agree with Schatz that, while this book examines the variation in Abkhaz mobilization trajectories, in-depth research with Georgian participants and nonparticipants in the war, potentially applying the framework advanced in this book, would enrich our understanding of this important but understudied case. The insights on how the ordinary Abkhaz made sense of and navigated their reality that this book presents offer a point of comparison for future studies of the war, which could ultimately contribute to conflict transformation by exposing the affected groups to different lived experiences of their history, as

reflections on a recent Tbilisi-based exhibition ‘The Corridors of Conflict: Abkhazia 1989–1995’ indicate, for example (Clogg, 2020).

The framework advanced in this book helps disaggregate what is often viewed as a unitary Abkhaz group (or any group presented in homogeneous terms) and question the generalized and otherwise problematic descriptions of this group as Russia’s ‘marionettes’, as Driscoll recognizes in his commentary. Former engineers, nurses, teachers, journalists, farmers, and housewives who shared their time and life histories with me hardly fit such descriptions and point to varied mobilization decisions among the Abkhaz. *Mobilizing* helps understand these decisions, which were more complex than commonly assumed. The Abkhaz did not act homogeneously in the hope of intervention by Moscow, as Driscoll’s reading of the events would lead us to conclude. Driscoll rightly points out that I could only access those respondents who returned to or stayed in Abkhazia after the war. Yet even within this sample, many report having left Abkhazia when the war began or hid in Abkhazia to escape the fighting to the extent that this was possible. These decisions characterize not only individuals without prior mobilization record but also those who had been actively involved in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before the war and could have been expected to join the Abkhaz effort with or without the hope of Moscow’s intervention. Others participated in the war in support and combat roles in their locales and areas of high-intensity fighting.

My microcomparative research design helps capture whether the differences in access to escape routes near the Russian border and some weapons in Gudauta where the former Soviet military base was located, which contrasted with the area immediately captured by Georgian forces in the east, conditioned these varied decisions. *Mobilizing* shows that the process of mobilization was similar across these structurally different locales. In particular, people’s different interpretations of the anticipated risk, or threat, associated with the Georgian advance into Abkhazia—as directed to their own safety, that of their families, localities, or the broader group—were central to their decisions. Had the Abkhaz acted on the basis of the expectation of Moscow’s intervention, we would not have observed this variation in mobilization decisions or perceptions of threat underlying these decisions. Why some but not other Abkhaz mobilized and did so in different ways and why people understood threat as directed toward different levels of their collectivity cannot be explained by the expectation of Moscow’s intervention.

Indeed, many respondents did not believe that a war could start in Abkhazia and hoped for the protection from the disintegrating Soviet troops, as in 1989, when these troops stopped the Georgian-Abkhaz clashes of the time. In this scenario, especially ‘reluctant’ participants, in Viterna’s (2006) terminology, would not have been pushed into mobilization as violence would have been expected to be prevented. However, Soviet troops no longer existed as such and the Russian Federation, which was emerging from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was in turmoil and its support was split between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides, particularly at the war’s onset, the period that the book zooms into. The former Soviet military base in Gudauta, for example, did not provide the Abkhaz side with access to arms comparable to the share of Soviet weapons in the South Caucasus that Georgia inherited from the Soviet Union. This was apparent in the advance of thousands-strong National Guard and Mkhedrioni troops, which were equipped with tanks and artillery and supported by helicopter fire, their immediate capture of parts of the territory of Abkhazia, and casualties on the Abkhaz side. Even within the Gudauta military base, not all former Soviet officers readily supplied weapons to the Abkhaz; some apparently sold these

weapons to Abkhaz participants. This suggests further disaggregating Russian involvement in the war as another fruitful avenue for future research, as Driscoll also notes.

More importantly, the ordinary Abkhaz experienced shock and confusion when Georgian troops entered Abkhazia and encircled the territory in the span of a day. In this context, Abkhaz leaders could have and most likely did engage in cost-benefit calculation with ‘Russian intervention’ as a variable that Driscoll’s reading of the events highlights, but these actors are not the focus of this book. None of the regular men and women I spoke with in Abkhazia engaged in such calculation. Instead, the Georgian advance ruptured their everyday activities and posed with unprecedented urgency the questions of whether this was even a war, who was threatened, by whom, and to what extent, and how to act in response. It is this notion of uncertainty as disruption of regular life, rather than uncertainty about how Moscow would respond, that animated ordinary people’s reaction to the Georgian advance (see also ‘Uncertainty Beyond Civil War Onset’ below). The collective threat framing that followed, informed by prior conflict experiences and networks that people trusted and turned to, helped answer these questions but did so in different ways. Based on how they perceived threat, some prioritized their own safety and escaped the fighting, whereas others joined the Abkhaz effort in their localities or areas of high-intensity fighting to protect their families, localities, or the broader group. This complexity of ordinary people’s decision-making in the uncertainty of the war’s onset challenges dominant Russia-centered narratives on the conflict and retrospective ascription of what we know about Russia’s military support today to ordinary people’s understanding of the situation before such support was provided.

Explaining Abkhaz Mobilization

I expand on the points made above in response to Caspersen’s call to discuss how instrumental the Abkhaz leadership was in the marginalization of alternative frames at the war’s onset (see also Schatz in this Symposium), how shared the resulting threat framing was, and to what extent this threat framing and the insistence on uncertainty are a product of the postwar justification of the war rather than the process that unfolded during its first days.

Caspersen is correct in that alternative frames surrounding the Georgian advance were marginalized in Abkhazia. The advance could have been interpreted as a policing action to secure the frequently looted railroad crossing Abkhazia or part of the ongoing civil war over the government in Tbilisi given that supporters of ousted President Gamsakhurdia were arguably hiding in Abkhazia at that time. But these frames did not resonate with the ordinary Abkhaz. In contrast, then Abkhaz leader Ardzinba’s televised address, which framed the advance as a threat to individual life, the Abkhaz group, and the entire population of Abkhazia, with reference to the history of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, corresponded to Abkhaz shared understandings of the conflict and their roles in it. These collective conflict identities formed through decades of observation of and participation in everyday intergroup confrontation, political contention, and violent opposition and gave this framing meaning.

However, attributing the outcome to the Abkhaz leadership would miss an important sequence and variation in the mechanism of collective threat framing that the book develops.³ Process-tracing reveals that Ardzinba’s address, which articulated the broad confines of the Georgian threat, took place *before* the adaptation and consolidation of this top-level

framing at the local and quotidian levels, respectively. It, therefore, set the process of mobilization in motion and affected the general perception of the Georgian advance as a threat rather than a policing action, among other alternatives, but did not determine specific local and quotidian interpretations of this broad framing, which varied. Crucially, this top-level framing was not simply adopted in community gatherings that took place across Abkhazia thereafter but was negotiated, most commonly to direct mobilization to the protection of localities rather than areas of high-intensity fighting that the overall outcome of the war depended on. It is in this community setting that dissenting voices, for example, of Abkhaz intellectuals who opposed violence on moral or other grounds, were rejected in favour of defensive mobilization. Initially, calls were made to defend entire villages and towns, including Georgian residents, but this changed as the war progressed.

Yet even local leaders were not followed unequivocally. Upon discussion with close family and friends, some individuals prioritized their own or family's safety and fled where possible, whereas others left their localities for areas of high-intensity fighting in support of the broader group but to the detriment of local mobilization. The choice to protect one's family over the broader group, for example, indicates that people's multiple commitments—to their own safety, that of their families, localities, and the broader group—competed for salience in the context where the meaning of the Georgian advance was ambiguous. As a result, while most men and women I spoke with came to share the top and local leaders' framing of the advance as a threat, not all joined the Abkhaz war effort or did so in prescribed ways because their quotidian networks channelled their threat perception toward these different commitments, often in surprising ways. This challenges explanations of mobilization based on top-down manipulation of information by powerful elites emphasized in the existing literature on framing, which Schatz brings into the discussion. Had the elite threat framing been the extent of the story, we would not have observed this variation.

Furthermore, had we not observed this variation, it would be tempting to conclude that the results of this research are merely a reflection of the Abkhaz postwar justification of the events or an attempt to demonstrate loyalty to the *de facto* state of Abkhazia. That Abkhaz men and women reported varied trajectories at the war's onset and were sometimes critical of their *de facto* state and even the war effort, including the dire economic conditions and decades of postwar violence that it produced, increased my confidence in interview responses. I adopted a number of strategies to probe these results and highlight three here. First, I recruited research participants with different prewar state and nonstate positions and postwar political affiliations to capture whether and how participants with these backgrounds spoke about their mobilization. I found, for example, that people with similar pre- and postwar backgrounds often made different decisions when the war began and this meant that pre- and postwar loyalties did not define their responses. Second, I triangulated responses within my interviews, comparing what participants who mobilized together or knew each other said, and between my interviews and observations, interviews collected by other researchers, and a range of other materials. This helped identify inconsistencies, such as 'heroic' anecdotes that were not supported in other accounts of the war. Archival materials, including Abkhaz letters to Soviet authorities, substantiated accounts of prewar experiences that people shared with me, having been written at the time. Finally, I reflected on my own emotional state in the interviews to understand why discussing themes critical of the war was possible with some but not other respondents (Shesterinina, 2019). These strategies informed the analysis.

Combined with these strategies, asking event questions in the interviews, such as ‘Where were you on August 14, 1992?’, ‘How did you learn about the Georgian advance into Abkhazia?’, and ‘What did you do next?’, alongside narrative questions, including ‘Did you anticipate the war?’, ‘How did you understand the risks associated with it?’, and ‘What motivated you to participate or not and in what capacity?’, allowed me to reconstruct sequences of individual actions at the war’s onset in great detail while keeping in mind people’s reflections on the events, which could have been shaped by their wartime and postwar histories. Specifically, I compared what individuals were doing before the Georgian advance to what they did when they learned about the advance. The contrast between the regular pace of life before the advance and the rupture that this advance brought about emerged from the reconstruction of these sequences. I pinpointed for whom and how this rupture manifested itself and this showed that people indeed experienced intense uncertainty. Hence, while the narratives about expectation of the war, for example, served to contextualize individual actions, the sequences of individual actions demonstrated the transition from usual activities, such as making jam or spending time at the beach, to shock and confusion associated with the Georgian advance as people abandoned these activities, to collective threat framing that helped make sense of the advance. Tracing these events along with careful consideration of narratives using the strategies outlined above made ‘ex-post’ explanation possible without claiming ‘ex-ante’ prediction, as Schatz puts it in his commentary.

Uncertainty Beyond Civil War Onset

Schatz encourages further reflection on how typical the intense uncertainty that characterized the war’s onset for the ordinary Abkhaz is, how the level and type of uncertainty might change in the course of civil war (see also Caspersen in this Symposium), and how the approach developed in this book speaks to existing explanations of mobilization, particularly if we shift the focus from outcomes to processes.

Mobilizing adopts the notion of intense uncertainty as a rupture of ‘everyday routines and expectancies’ that poses with unprecedented urgency dilemmas of mobilization for ordinary people faced with political violence and war (Snow et al., 1998, p. 2). This notion differs from the common understanding of uncertainty as incomplete information about others’ intentions, which can be overcome when relevant information becomes available.⁴ Instead, I highlight multiple, competing meanings that political violence and war can have, especially at their outset, when old routines and expectancies are disrupted but new ones have not developed through the normalization of violence or the establishment of an alternative social order during the war. Regardless of the quantity and quality of information brought into these environments, this information can be interpreted in distinct ways based on preceding histories of conflict and with whom individuals make sense of the events. Caspersen, therefore, rightly notes that even increased access to information through new technologies would not preclude the emergence of competing narratives on the meaning of the events and their impact on mobilization decisions.⁵ This is exemplified in the discussion of the early phases of mobilization in Syria in 2011 in the concluding chapter of the book.

This intense uncertainty was undoubtedly augmented by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequences this had for the territories, such as Abkhazia, that were placed at the bottom of the multilevel hierarchical structure of the Soviet state. We can

think of this general uncertainty around the political status of Abkhazia, which underwent changes from a Soviet Socialist Republic established in 1921 to an autonomous republic of Georgia in 1931, with calls to further diminish this status amidst the Soviet Union's collapse, as a structural condition in which the Abkhaz mobilized. Yet the Georgian advance into Abkhazia in this context presented a radically different sense of uncertainty that raised existential questions for individuals, families, communities, and the entire Abkhaz group.

We see such uncertainty in settings as diverse as Rwanda and Syria, the cases that the book's concluding chapter considers in parallel, and in other cases in the former Soviet Union where violence disrupted everyday life in major ways and could have different meanings. Broers (2019, p. 43), for example, outlines how atrocities allegedly perpetrated against Azerbaijanis in the Armenian province of Kapan raised similar existential questions in Azerbaijan's Sumgait in February, 1988. Anti-Armenian communal violence followed rallies in this and other cities where the Armenian threat was framed, underpinned by narratives from the past and intensified by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and resulting calls to unite the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of Azerbaijan with Armenia. These events of violence, in turn, created '[c]onfusion over what had happened in Sumgait, and who had killed whom', among Armenians in Azerbaijan's Kirovabad (today's Ganja) where local leaders endorsed the preemptive ethnic cleansing of Armenians (Broers, 2019, p. 44). But even in this case, 'many individuals did not follow the roles accorded them', with local ties playing an important part (Broers, 2019, p. 44). Future studies could apply the notion of intense uncertainty evident in this example to the wars that took place in the broader region to understand how such uncertainty shaped mobilization on a case-by-case basis, most recently in Ukraine.

This, however, is not the only notion of uncertainty that characterizes settings of intergroup violence and war. When violence is normalized through the culture of fear, as Green (1999) shows in Guatemala, or shared expectations about behavior develop in new wartime social orders, as Arjona (2016) demonstrates in Colombia, the notion of ongoing uncertainty defined by relatively stable routines that people adapt to becomes more relevant. In these contexts, uncertainty can still be 'punctuated by surprise', including to the extreme degree discussed in this book, and its level and type can vary across space and change over time (Schatz in this Symposium). For example, in the Colombian civil war, Arjona (2016, p. 28) distinguishes between areas where clear rules of behavior did not exist and people lived with great uncertainty and those where institutions were created to govern civilian and combatant behavior and the level of uncertainty was low because 'people [could] form expectations regarding most domains of their life, most of the time'. These arrangements—and those in between—varied across the territory of Colombia and changed during the war, including due to shifts in territorial control over these areas and other wartime dynamics.

Future research could examine whether and under what conditions such changes are accompanied by disruptions of the patterns of everyday life where questions on the meaning of violence and how to respond are prominent and how the intense and ongoing types of uncertainty interact as a result in these settings to affect people's choices during the war that both Caspersen and Schatz draw our attention to. This could help understand whether the mechanism of collective threat framing, which centers on people's shared understandings of conflict and their roles in it and social networks they are embedded in at the time, could shed light on navigating uncertainty beyond the

moment of the onset of intergroup violence and war, that is, in decision making in the course of hostilities. This book demonstrates that this mechanism better captures the variation in Abkhaz mobilization trajectories than existing explanations that focus on historical grievances and social norms, which overpredict mobilization in the Abkhaz case, or economic incentives and security maximization, which underpredict it. The goal to apply this mechanism in other settings, especially with regard to changes in the dynamics of conflict over time, aligns with Chandra's (2006) call to produce generalizations about mechanisms rather than outcomes that Schatz reminds us of.

My new Civil War Paths project 'Understanding Civil War from Pre- to Post-War Stages: A Comparative Approach', funded by a £1.2 m UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship, looks at such changes across a medium number of cases and extends the focus from mobilization to a range of conflict dynamics using an actor-centered, relational, and processual approach inspired by research in civil war studies, social movement literature, and other related fields (Shesterinina, [forthcoming](#)). Building on the framework developed in *Mobilizing*, including the view of civil war as part of broader conflict rather than an isolated phenomenon and the emphasis on the different meanings that participants in the events attribute to their conflict experiences, an interdisciplinary team of researchers in the project explores multiple state, nonstate, civilian, and external actors in these settings, their evolving interactions, and what tracing these interactions with careful attention to the very participants involved can tell us about how conflicts turn violent, how civil wars unfold over time, and how distinct wartime dynamics affect the postwar potential for peace. The importance of uncertainty, collective identities, and social networks in conflict processes underlying this book forms the foundation for this research programme.

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Notes

1. See, among others, Baev (2003), Beissinger (2002), Cohen (1999), Coppieters (2002), Cornell (2000), Derluguian (2005), Driscoll (2015), Hewitt (2013), Kemoklidze (2016), Kvarchelia (1998), Matsaberidze (2011), Nodia (1998), Zürcher et al. (2005), Zürcher (2007), and Zverev (1996).
2. See summary table in Shesterinina (2016), Online Appendix (p. 30).
3. I introduced this mechanism in Shesterinina (2016).
4. See Matejova and Shesterinina (2022) for an overview of different approaches to uncertainty.
5. See Wedeen (2019) on uncertainty as a result of an excess of information in the high-speed information age.

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