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MOBILIZING IN UNCERTAINTY

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Collective Identities and War in Abkhazia

Anastasia Shesterinina

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In memory of Lee Ann Fujii

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Note on Translation, Transliteration, and Spelling

Unless noted otherwise, all interview excerpts are from interviews that I conducted in Russian. Interview excerpts and cited texts from Russian sources are presented in English translation. All translations are my own.

Where deemed significant, I transliterate Cyrillic into Latin script and italicize the term. I present the English translation of the term in square brackets. If a particular transliteration of a term or an author's name has become common in English sources, I use that transliteration. Titles of Russian texts are transliterated in the bibliography.

The English spelling of proper nouns differs in Georgia (e.g., "Sokhumi") and Abkhazia (e.g., "Sukhum"). Except when quoting from interviews or cited texts, I use the spelling common in academic research (e.g., "Sukhum/i"). Both "Abkhaz" and "Abkhazian" appear in academic research. I use the former, unless spelled otherwise in a cited text, to refer to the Abkhaz group and use the latter to refer to the Abkhazian language.

FIGURE 0.1. Map of Abkhazia.

Introduction

THE PUZZLE OF MOBILIZATION

When the war started, I was at home. I had a day off. It was summer, hot. In the morning, we learned that the Georgian forces were already in Sukhum, there was fighting at the Red Bridge. First I was in shock, then we began gathering with friends, relatives, deciding what to do, what's next. We gathered at the administration. No one understood what was going on—how serious it was, how long it would last, whether it was a war.

—Abkhaz fighter, Gagra, 2011

On August 14, 1992, Georgian troops crossed the Ingur/i River into eastern Abkhazia, a breakaway territory of Georgia located in the South Caucasus region neighboring Russia, and swiftly advanced toward the capital, Sukhum/i. The following morning, Georgian marines landed from the Black Sea in the west, encircling the small territory of Abkhazia in the span of a day.[1] For most ordinary men and women in Abkhazia, the events that marked the beginning of the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 were characterized by intense uncertainty.[2]

"Was this a war?" "Who was threatened, by whom, and to what extent?" "How should we act in response?" These were the dilemmas of the first days of the war for the Abkhaz. Many soon gathered the hunting rifles they kept in their homes, armed themselves at the former Soviet military base in Abkhazia, or joined Abkhaz mobilization unarmed. Others hid in Abkhazia, fled to nearby Russia, or in rare cases defected to the stronger Georgian side. They illustrate the question that motivates this book: How do ordinary people navigate uncertainty to make mobilization decisions in civil war? In particular, how did the Abkhaz go from the uncertainty created by the events of mid-August 1992 to a range of decisions about whether and in what capacity to mobilize? Why did some join the war effort, while others escaped the fighting?

Argument

The puzzle of mobilization in civil war is commonly framed in terms of the risks that individuals assume in voluntarily joining armed groups.[3] Explanations of mobilization focus on what drives individuals to accept the high risks, isolating the grievances that social groups develop before the war, the social pressures and incentives that armed actors provide to increase risk acceptance, and the in-process benefits of participation.[4] In other accounts, where fighting is not seen as riskier than nonparticipation, the skills and resources available to armed groups make joining an attractive option for survival-oriented civilians.

Both explanations are based either on the assumption of ordinary people's knowledge of the risks involved in mobilization or on observation of the patterns of violence, often long after mobilization had taken place. Such premises may be theoretically necessary and empirically valid, but they miss a central feature of mobilization: the perceptions of anticipated risk, or threat, by potential participants that shape their decisions. Why some potential participants join the fighting and in what capacity, but others do not, cannot be grasped without knowing their interpretation.

I argue that people come to perceive threat in different ways, affected by earlier experiences of conflict and by social networks at the time of mobilization. They act differently based on whom they understand to be threatened and mobilize to protect their own safety, family and friends, or broader segments of society. When faced with war, individuals do not simply choose to fight or not to fight based on a given notion of risk. Rather, they call on shared understandings of conflict and their roles in it—what I call *collective conflict identities* that develop before the war through observation of and participation in everyday confrontation, political contention, and violent opposition—to make sense of violence. As these appeals travel across society, people consolidate mobilization decisions with immediate social networks, whether to flee, hide, provide indirect or direct support, or join the fighting in the back or front lines, alone or together. I call this information filtering mechanism *collective threat framing*. Threat perceptions and mobilization decisions have lasting effects on how conflicts unfold and how individuals continue to mobilize during and after the war.

Underlying this argument is the recognition that ordinary people experience intense uncertainty when war breaks out in their communities. This experience differs from the ongoing uncertainty in protracted fighting, where people develop expectations about the occurrence of violence and how to act in response (Arjona 2016). In contrast, the onset of war disrupts "everyday routines and expectancies" in major ways and poses with urgency the dilemmas of mobilization (Snow et al. 1998, 2). In a context where violence can have different meanings,

ordinary people rely on shared history and familiar social networks to understand who is threatened, by whom, and to what extent and how to act in response.

This argument has two analytical parts. First, it is a historical approach to mobilization. Most studies of civil war bracket prewar processes, but I argue that the history of engagement with intergroup conflict shapes collective conflict identities that relate individual actions to the group.[5] I stress that these identities evolve through observation of and participation in collective action to situate individuals at the onset of civil war.

Second, my approach is relational, in line with that of Mark S. Granovetter (1985, 487) and Lee Ann Fujii (2009), who analyze individual actions as "embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations." Organizational studies of mobilization focus on prewar social networks as conduits between armed groups and the wider population (Staniland 2012; Parkinson 2013). By contrast, I find that social networks play a critical role in providing information at the time of uncertainty that generates different threat perceptions and mobilization decisions.

Mobilization does not take place in a vacuum, absent shared conflict history and the social networks that feed everyday life. It is an *ongoing process involving organization of and participation in collective action* in which earlier experiences of conflict and immediate social networks at the time of mobilization interact. Analyzing how these factors interact under conditions of uncertainty to produce a range of mobilization decisions among potential participants in civil war is my core contribution. In this book, I develop this sociohistorical approach to mobilization.

Field Research on Civil War Mobilization

To understand how people make difficult decisions under conditions of uncertainty brought on by war, I turn to face-to-face, immersive research with the actors in Abkhaz mobilization. We cannot grasp people's conflict experiences or their social networks by relying solely on elite interviews, archival and news sources, or secondary materials. These sources are essential to an overall understanding of conflict, but they rarely document how the participants themselves perceive the reality they face.

To get at the decades-long organization of and participation in intergroup conflict from the perspective of the ordinary Abkhaz, the interaction between prewar and wartime factors in their mobilization for war, and continued postwar contention, I conducted fieldwork over eight months in 2010–2013, primarily in Abkhazia, but also in Georgia and Russia. This fieldwork explored the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict during the Soviet and post-Soviet decades, but I focused on the

first four days of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, August 14–17, 1992. I collected 150 in-depth interviews in Abkhazia and 30 in Georgia and Russia and also extensive secondary and archival materials.

I conducted fieldwork in four locales in Abkhazia selected for variation in patterns of territorial control and access to conflict resources in the war of 1992–1993. In each locale, I interviewed people across a wide range of prewar, wartime, and postwar political backgrounds and roles in mobilization to gather a broad variety of responses beyond the master narrative of conflict. Interviews underlie my analysis and are substantiated and contextualized with participant observation in national and local war-related events, meetings of mothers' and veterans' organizations, communal celebrations and everyday life, original news and document archives, and secondary data, including comparable interviews collected by other researchers.

To address issues of memory and potential bias in accounts of a war that took place two decades earlier, I paid careful attention to how respondents spoke about events, I cross-checked interview responses within and across interviews and with everyday conversations, and I addressed events from different angles using narrative and event questions. I compared responses to those I collected from Georgians displaced by the war and from experts in Georgia and Russia and those collected by other researchers, often with the same participants, at the time of the war in 1992–1993 and thereafter, as well as to archival and secondary materials. These strategies helped me verify the patterns that emerged in my interviews and increased confidence in interview responses, both individually and in the aggregate.

People who spoke with me at length about their conflict experiences used to be engineers and miners; doctors and nurses; teachers, professors, and university students; writers and journalists; security and party officials; tourism and cultural workers; and farmers and housewives. Some of these people maintained their positions after the war, but others became involved in the government, the security apparatus, nongovernmental organizations, and the business sector. It took many years of postwar poverty and destruction—deepened by an economic blockade by the Commonwealth of Independent States that isolated Abkhazia—before day-to-day life returned to normality for many of my 150 respondents. One half, including women, participated in the war in different ways. Many were injured and lost family members and friends. The other half escaped the fighting in or outside Abkhazia.

My semi-structured interviews walked through respondents' life histories in the context of conflict. Questions on childhood brought up family stories of repression, respondents' early memories of intergroup friendships and enmities, and history as they learned it at school. Reflections on prewar adulthood focused on daily interactions with Georgian family members, friends, classmates, and col-

leagues and whether, how, and with whom respondents participated in conflict-related events before the war. Combined, these responses conveyed how respondents understood the conflict and their part in it, or collective conflict identities that situated respondents at the war's onset.

The interviews then covered in great detail the first days of the war—where respondents were, how they learned about the war, whom they talked to, what actions they took. Beyond step-by-step recollections of mobilization trajectories, I gathered narratives on whether people anticipated a war, how they viewed Georgian forces, and what motivated them to act. These responses reflected how uncertainty at the war's onset was channeled into different mobilization decisions through collective threat framing. Reflections on wartime and postwar mobilization concluded the interviews, capturing long-lasting effects of threat perceptions and mobilization decisions for how the conflict unfolded into a full-fledged war and how people continued to mobilize during and after the war to protect the segments of society that they perceived to be threatened.

These rich data present the process of mobilization as understood by the participants themselves, isolate its social mechanisms, and shed new light on the understudied case of Abkhaz mobilization. In the next sections, I draw on these data to outline how intergroup conflict developed before the war in Abkhazia, how individuals went from uncertainty to a range of mobilization decisions at the war's onset, and what this tells us about alternative approaches to mobilization in the Abkhaz case. I conclude with implications of this analysis for future research on mobilization.

Intergroup Conflict in Prewar Abkhazia

Before the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993, Abkhazia was one of the most visited tourist destinations in the Soviet Union. Its coastal resorts were bustling with activity. Russian, the common language in the Soviet space, but also Georgian, Abkhazian, Armenian, and Greek could be heard on the streets, reflecting the demographic makeup of a multiethnic republic. According to the All-Union Census of 1989, the last taken before the war, in the population of 525,061, Georgians and Mingrelians, a Georgian subgroup, constituted 239,872 (45.7%); the Abkhaz, 93,267 (17.8%); Armenians, 76,541 (14.6%); Russians, 74,914 (14.3%); Greeks, 14,664 (2.8%); and others, 15,959 (4.8%).[6] The population of six of Abkhazia's seven districts, Gagra, Gudauta, Gulripsh/i, Ochamchira/e, Sukhum/i, Tqvarchal/Tqvarcheli, and Gal/i, was mixed; the district of Gal/i, located close to Georgia, was predominantly Georgian. Shared education, employment, and social activities tied individuals and families from different groups in institutions

of neighborhood, friendship, and intermarriage. Familial and communal celebrations, assemblies, and elders' councils allowed for preservation of a distinct Abkhaz heritage. Abkhazia was a diverse and highly integrated prewar society.

But underlying the relative calm in Abkhazia were tensions that characterized everyday intergroup relations. Public gatherings, protests, and clashes took place periodically in the Soviet period. These tensions have a long history, going back to the mass deportations of the Abkhaz by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and the repopulation of Abkhazia, which over time produced a near majority of Georgians. The political status of Abkhazia also changed in the Soviet period. Both Georgia and Abkhazia entered the Soviet Union as Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) in 1921 but soon established special treaty relations, and in 1931 the status of Abkhazia was downgraded to an autonomous republic of the Georgian SSR. Social policies that favored the Georgian language and culture were associated with these changes and created a sense of Georgianization among the Abkhaz.

Abkhaz men and women vividly remember uncomfortable silences and confrontations that emerged when their classmates, coworkers, neighbors, and even friends raised the issues of Georgianization and in particular Abkhazia's political status in day-to-day conversations. They tell family stories that they heard as children of the closing of Abkhaz schools in the 1940s–1950s, when their parents or grandparents could not study in their native Abkhazian language, and the rewriting of Abkhaz history in the 1960s–1970s, diminishing the role of the Abkhaz in Abkhazia's past. They recount street jokes, restaurant brawls, the inability to buy bread if they did not speak Georgian in the 1980s, and the split in society around the first violent clashes of 1989, when intergroup divides appeared in regular jobs, university, and government offices. Armed groups, the Abkhaz Guard and the Georgian paramilitary Mkhedrioni (Horsemen), were formed and became active in Abkhazia.

Many Abkhaz participated and most knew family members or friends who took part in the clashes of 1989 and other events that preceded the war of 1992–1993. As early as 1921 and repeatedly thereafter, the Abkhaz political elite and intellectuals sent letters and telegrams to Soviet authorities in Tbilisi and Moscow requesting that their group's concerns be addressed. Popular mobilization unfolded in coordination with and parallel to elite efforts, taking the ordinary Abkhaz to the streets and traditional gathering places in nearly every decade of Soviet life. In 1921, after a period of Georgian military presence in Abkhazia, Abkhaz political leaders urged the population to join the revolutionary organization Kiaraz (Self-Help), which fought to establish Soviet power in Abkhazia together with Russia's Red Army. During the Stalin era in 1931, up to twenty thousand Abkhaz gathered in the Abkhaz enclave village of Duripsh/i to protest Ab-

khazia's status change. Mass protests took place during de-Stalinization in 1957, Brezhnev-era economic reforms in 1965 and 1967, and stagnation in 1977–1978, as the Abkhaz sought to reclaim their language, education, and history.

During perestroika in the 1980s, broader segments of Abkhazia's population joined Abkhaz mobilization. Aidgylara (Unity) emerged as an umbrella organization of the Abkhaz national movement that united non-Georgian minorities, coordinated public activities, and was active in the government of Abkhazia. Members of Aidgylara were central to the organization of the largest gathering in Soviet Abkhazia that brought over thirty thousand Abkhaz and other minorities to the Lykhnashta field in the Gudauta district in 1989 to demand the restoration of Abkhazia's SSR status "as proclaimed in 1921." The gathering and the resulting letter to Moscow that called on Soviet authorities to address the Abkhaz demand played a catalyzing role in events leading to the Georgian-Abkhaz clashes of 1989. Yet the trigger of violence was the opening of a Sukhum/i branch of Tbilisi State University, which Georgian professors and students initiated but non-Georgian professors, students, and the broader public vigorously protested. Clashes started in an attempt to prevent entry exams and escalated into the greatest violence between ordinary people on both sides before the war of 1992–1993.

Soviet troops stopped the violence, and an investigation was launched in Georgia. The response in Abkhazia was dramatic, a general strike of up to forty thousand workers across the republic coordinated by Aidgylara. Strikers claimed that Georgian and Abkhaz authorities were biased. They demanded that the investigation be transferred to the Soviet center in Moscow and were successful. Abkhazia thereafter was relatively calm. Minor intergroup violence broke out in the following years, but nothing comparable to that of 1989.

Political institutions became the epicenter of conflict. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the leader of the Georgian national movement that pursued independence from the Soviet Union, and his party, Round Table–Free Georgia, won multiparty elections in October 1990 and consolidated power in May 1991 when Gamsakhurdia became the first president of Georgia. In December 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba, a fervent supporter of the Abkhaz cause promoted by Aidgylara, was elected chairman of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia. These leaders took simultaneous steps to break away from and to preserve Soviet structures, respectively. Georgia proclaimed its independence in April 1991, while the non-Georgian part of the government and the population of Abkhazia sought to remain in the Soviet Union through a referendum in March 1991, which Georgia banned. In this context, Abkhazia's strengthening ties with Russia and the North Caucasus and Georgia's war in South Ossetia in 1991–1992 pushed Gamsakhurdia to strike an electoral compromise that prioritized the Abkhaz in Abkhazia's government. The Abkhaz bloc comprising non-Georgian minorities thus won a majority in the October–December 1991

elections, and the government was subsequently divided along Georgian and non-Georgian lines.

The Soviet Union collapsed, and in December 1991 the National Guard, which formed the basis of the future Georgian army, together with the Mkhedrioni ousted Gamsakhurdia in a coup d'état, to pave the way for Eduard Shevardnadze's return to lead Georgia after his service as minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union. The new Georgian government was engaged in a war with pro-Gamsakhurdia forces, called Zviadists, until 1993. The Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 took place in this context of social polarization following the clashes of 1989 and the political volatility surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Futility of Abkhaz Resistance

An outside observer would not have expected the Abkhaz to mobilize in the Georgian-Abkhaz war. There was little chance that "a group with the structural characteristics . . . of the Abkhaz would have engaged in separatist mobilization" (Beissinger 2002, 222). The individual costs of mobilization gravely outweighed its potential benefits. The Abkhaz were at a significant disadvantage in manpower and arms when the war began. The population of 5 million in Georgia and the 240,000 Georgians in Abkhazia greatly exceeded the 93,000 Abkhaz. Georgia did not have a functioning army in 1992, but its forces, which included armed units from outside Abkhazia and local supporters in Abkhazia, were more numerous than any resistance the Abkhaz could have mounted, even with other non-Georgian minorities in Abkhazia.

A state successor of the Soviet Union, Georgia inherited a large share of Soviet weapons in the South Caucasus. The former Soviet military base in Gudauta did not provide comparable access to arms to the Abkhaz. Right before the war, Abkhaz authorities had collected weapons from the population in an attempt to halt criminal activity. The only weapons the Abkhaz had when the war began were hunting rifles that some hid in their homes and arms that others took, bought, or were given at the Gudauta military base. An inflow of foreign fighters and armaments strengthened the Abkhaz force in the course of the war, but this support cannot explain mobilization at the war's onset, when Georgian forces immediately captured most of the territory of Abkhazia.

When the war began, 2,000–5,000 National Guard and Mkhedrioni troops marched into the Gal/i district, equipped with tanks and artillery and supported by helicopter fire (Baev 2003, 138; Pachulija 2010, 27; Zürcher 2007, 131). They besieged a part of eastern Abkhazia around the mining center of Tqvarchal/Tqvarcheli, along the single major road connecting the territory; entered the

capital, Sukhum/i; and "shelled the parliament, forcing the Abkhaz leadership to retreat to Gudauta" in central Abkhazia (Cornell 2000, 159). As the eastern advance progressed, 250–1,000 Georgian marines landed in seaside Tsandrypsh/Gantiadi in the west (Baev 2003, 138; Pachulija 2010, 77; Zürcher 2007, 131). Joined by a local branch of the Mkhedrioni and other supporters, they "block[ed] Abkhazia's border with Russia" and moved toward the western tourist center of Gagra (Baev 2003, 138). All but central Abkhazia was soon under Georgian control.

The Abkhaz thus ran substantial risks of repression, injury, and death if they mobilized on the Abkhaz side—risks that are common in cases of mobilization against superior state forces (Wood 2003). These risks were evident as early as July 1989, when clashes that broke out in Sukhum/i spread across Abkhazia and attracted thousands of Georgians from Abkhazia and Georgia over two days. Witnesses recall that "Abkhaz leaders were writing to Russia the whole night [of July 15 and] appealed to save us: 'If you do not send the army, there will be no Abkhaz people.'" Indeed, the Soviet army's intervention, the last in Abkhazia before the dissolution of the Union, prevented further escalation. But the dominance of Georgians and the repressive capacity of the Georgian state were demonstrated: up to four hundred people were injured or killed in the clashes (Sagarija 2002, 45). Many Abkhaz participants, particularly party officials, were removed from office and criminally charged (Sagarija 2002, 60; Hewitt 1996).

Once the fighting broke out in August 1992, witnesses recount, immediate casualties occurred on the Abkhaz side, first among the Abkhaz Guard and then among ordinary people who had mobilized. Formally the Special Regiment of the Internal Forces (SRIF) of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz Guard was formed in 1991, modeled on the so-called Eighth Regiment of the Soviet army, which suppressed violence in Abkhazia before the Union's collapse. Former Soviet officers were invited to serve in the SRIF. Members of Aidgylara were active in recruitment into the force, which over a year enlisted one thousand fighters, including one hundred regulars. The guards met Georgian forces twice before the war, in an attempt to prevent their crossing the Ingur/i River in February and April 1992. However, most reservists were dismissed on the war's eve, and the post near the Ingur/i River was left largely unmanned. The few remaining guards near the entry to Abkhazia were instantly captured and imprisoned as Georgian forces crossed the Ingur/i. Fighters further along the route to Sukhum/i who opened fire and the ordinary Abkhaz who joined the Guard or mobilized spontaneously incurred the first losses as Georgian forces surrounded the territory. The Abkhaz thus "joined the armed struggle in spite of the apparent futility of resistance" (Brojdo 2008, 51).

Uncertainty at the War's Onset

Although the futility of Abkhaz mobilization may have been obvious from the outside, for the participants themselves the nature of potential violence and the risks involved were not well understood when Georgian forces entered Abkhazia. Time and again respondents in my interviews recall feeling at a loss on the day of the Georgian advance. The events came as a shock for both the Abkhaz who were part of the Abkhaz Guard and those who had not been previously recruited into its armed units. Most men and women were occupied with regular daily activities and were deeply confused as helicopters appeared over Abkhazia and thousands of troops broke into Sukhum/i and Gagra. "Tanks entered all of a sudden on August 14," witnesses say. "People were at work, at the beach. It was like thunder in the middle of a sunny day." Three questions emerged with unprecedented urgency and intensity for the ordinary Abkhaz.

Was this a war? People could not make out the meaning of the Georgian advance. Many did not believe that a war could start in Abkhazia and interpreted the events as a clash similar to that of 1989, hoping for protection from the disintegrating Soviet troops, as in the past. "We thought it would be over right away, that it was like another clash," the regular Abkhaz explain. "We felt that we were protected by the great powerful Soviet Union." The events could be understood as a policing action by Georgia. The advance took place as criminal activity was rampant on the railroad that crossed Abkhazia and civil war for control of the government escalated in Georgia. Yet the motivation behind the Georgian advance was not straightforward. "They said that they came to guard the railroad, but how can you guard the railroad with tanks?" was a question commonly asked in Abkhazia.

Related concerns stood out sharply as the Abkhaz navigated uncertainty about the Georgian advance. *Who was threatened, by whom, and to what extent?* If the Georgian action was related to railroad security or the ongoing civil war in Georgia, Georgian troops could have entered Abkhazia to pursue criminal bands or supporters of President Gamsakhurdia ousted from Tbilisi (who were ostensibly hiding in Abkhazia with kidnapped Georgian officials). But the nature of the advance was puzzling. Could Georgian troops have arrived to "settle the problem of Abkhazia once and for all," as one respondent put it, by securing Georgia's control over the territory with armed force? Would Abkhaz leaders come under attack? Would the ordinary Abkhaz and Abkhazia's broader population suffer as a result? Finally, would local Georgians join the advance? Would looming violence be intimate (Fujii 2009), involving Georgian family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues in what was to come?

Uncertainty over the nature, subject, and object of threat posed the ultimate question. *How to act in response?* The ordinary Abkhaz did not know whether or

in what capacity to mobilize on behalf of their group. Many remembered the risks of mobilization from the clashes of 1989. The Georgian capacity for mobilization was vast, and Georgia had a repressive apparatus that could be used against future dissent. While large segments of the population had mobilized in the past, most Abkhaz were not prepared for war, as relative calm prevailed during the three years after the clashes. The core dilemma for the Abkhaz was *for whom to mobilize*. Was one's own or one's kin's safety a priority over that of the Abkhaz group or the population at large, including its Georgian part? "Where could we go, run?," men and women caught up in the turmoil asked. "What to do, whom to tell, how to save, where to get weapons?"

In these conditions, at least one thousand Abkhaz mobilized at the war's onset and up to 13 percent of the population mobilized in the course of the war. This estimate is based on casualty figures. While these figures are contested, the Abkhaz report 4,040 deaths, 2,220 combatants and 1,820 civilians; 8,000 injuries; and 122 missing in action (HRW 1995, 5n1). Over 4,000 deaths, 10,000 injuries, and 1,000 missing are recorded on the Georgian side, with most of the prewar Georgian population of Abkhazia displaced as a result of the war (HRW 1995, 5n1). Mainly, the Abkhaz mobilized on the Abkhaz side when the war began, but many Armenians and other non-Georgian minorities and foreign fighters, particularly from the North Caucasus and Russia, joined in the course of the fighting (Yamskov 2009, 167–168).[7]

Most mobilized spontaneously, but some had been previously recruited into the Abkhaz Guard. A minority adopted support or fighter roles to defend Abkhazia's population as a whole, including its Georgian part, but, in general, individuals joined on behalf of the Abkhaz group. Individuals often left the relative safety of native locales for areas of intense fighting, initially the capital, Sukhum/i, and the western center of Gagra. Others stayed to protect their villages, towns, or cities or their families and friends there. Individuals shifted between these roles as the war went on. Among the people able to fight or otherwise support the Abkhaz, many, however, hid in places of relative safety in Abkhazia; fled, mainly to Russia, with kin or alone; or in rare cases defected to the Georgian side.

Approaches to Civil War Mobilization

These divergent mobilization trajectories cut across individual differences in age, family and occupation; ties to local Georgian communities; and prewar participation in Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. They cannot be explained by preferences developed before the war, as conflict experiences and group loyalty were widely expressed among the Abkhaz, yet their mobilization decisions were distinct.

Historical grievances (Gurr 1970; Horowitz 1985), community norms (Petersen 2001), and social sanctions and rewards (Weinstein 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) do not fully capture this variation. Nor do material (Weinstein 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) and security incentives (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007), regardless of prewar commitments, as the Abkhaz mobilized on the weaker Abkhaz side, often unarmed.

Political, cultural, and economic grievances are central in the *relative deprivation* approach to mobilization. In this approach, the difference between what people expect and what they attain underlies the relative inequality between individuals (vertical) and groups (horizontal) that motivates them to act (Østby 2013). "Large-scale group mobilization—particularly for violent actions—is unlikely to occur in the absence of serious grievances at both leadership and mass level" (Stewart 2008, 12). The risks of mobilization are overwhelmed by shared experiences of injustice (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 25). These experiences could have prompted the Abkhaz to mobilize in 1992.

Indeed, the common themes that the Abkhaz raise when explaining their participation in the war include the change in Abkhazia's political status, Georgian demographic expansion in Abkhazia, and the so-called Georgianization of Abkhazia, which Abkhaz respondents characterize as benefiting the Georgian group relative to the Abkhaz. They note economic deprivation as well: the entity above the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia in the Soviet state hierarchy, Georgia, controlled most of Abkhazia's economy. Leading economic posts were occupied primarily by Georgians, in part as a result of appointment in the Soviet apparatus and in part due to the small proportion of the Abkhaz in the population.

However, exclusion at the leadership level did not translate to unequal access to regular employment, where Soviet nationalities policy based on group inclusion applied, giving the Abkhaz access comparable to that of other demographic groups, at least in principle.[8] Other grievances were addressed by the Soviet authorities in Moscow and Tbilisi, especially in the last decades of the Union, on a case-by-case basis and with titular quotas favoring the Abkhaz in education and employment. As the Union collapsed, the electoral compromise struck with Gamsakhurdia overrepresented the Abkhaz in Abkhazia's government. Yet, despite the steps taken to remedy Abkhaz concerns, historical grievances remained. Still, these common motivations resulted in highly different mobilization trajectories, both in terms of participation and nonparticipation and in terms of where and for whom people mobilized in the war. How the widely shared grievances mattered in producing variation in Abkhaz mobilization for war is unclear from the theories of relative deprivation.

Whereas the relative deprivation approach struggles to answer why some individuals do not mobilize as part of the group, given common grievances, its al-

ternative, the *collective action* approach, struggles to answer why people participate in collective action at all (Lichbach 1995, 13). This second approach to mobilization is based on the premise introduced by Mancur Olson (1965) that collective action is costly and its benefits are distributed across the relevant group regardless of individual participation. Thus free riding should be expected from individuals, but their participation can be incentivized with selective access to social and material goods. Jeremy M. Weinstein (2007, 8) summarizes the collective action problem as it applies to civil war: "Attracting recruits to participate in civil war is not an easy task. The work of rebellion is difficult and potentially dangerous. And when a rebel group sweeps to power and transforms the political regime in a country, it is difficult to exclude nonparticipants from the new freedoms that come with political change. So while the potential costs of participation make joining unattractive, the promised benefits may not tip the balance." In this approach, people reevaluate the risks of participation in civil war as armed groups motivate participation using material incentives (Weinstein 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008) and social rewards and punishments that relate individual participation to prewar group ties and commitments, especially in strong communities that impose norms of reciprocity (Petersen 2001). Material and social incentives thus could have affected mobilization decisions of the Abkhaz in 1992.

Yet material rewards were unavailable at the time of mobilization. The disadvantage in manpower and arms meant that the Abkhaz saw little prospect of benefit in a dire situation of power asymmetry. With regard to material incentives, looting was observed on the Georgian rather than the Abkhaz side early in the war (HRW 1995, 6). On the other hand, the density and strength of Abkhaz social ties could have affected mobilization. These ties are based on *familia* (family name) relations and traditional Apsuara (Abkhazianness) norms, including that of reciprocity, reinforced by the history of political, demographic, and cultural suppression and the small size of the Abkhaz group. A classic strong community (Petersen 2001), the Abkhaz thus could punish nonparticipation with postwar exclusion. Some evidence of community exclusion exists, as a respondent illustrates: "[Those] who went to fight on the other side or left for Russia or Georgia . . . are traitors. My brother, for example, his wife is Georgian, they went to Moscow after the war began, then she went to Georgia and he returned. . . . I cannot accept him." In turn, participants were rewarded with postwar status and reputation. Many fighters received government posts and were awarded war medals, both highly regarded in Abkhaz society.

Nonetheless, the effects of participation on postwar status were inconsistent: both fighters and those who escaped the war would assume leadership roles. One respondent captures it well: "When they returned after the war, we could not ask

them why they left since it is such a sensitive question. But they brought back money . . . [and] became leaders." More important, postwar effects do not give a sense of the situation at the war's onset. Then, strong community pressures, passed through the generations in social institutions and reinforced by participation in prewar activism, applied to most Abkhaz, but not all mobilized to fight. The collective action approach leaves unanswered the question of how the social environment drew some but not others to participate in the war.

In response to the collective action program, the third approach to mobilization, what I call *strategic interaction*, posits that participation in civil war is not necessarily riskier than nonparticipation. As Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew A. Kocher (2007, 183) argue, "The costs of nonparticipation and free riding often equal or even exceed those of participation: while it is undoubtedly true that rebels run serious personal risks in war zones, war is very dangerous for nonrebels as well." The skills and resources that armed groups provide their members increase the security of participants in this approach and account for decisions of security-seeking individuals irrespective of their prewar preferences (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). The Abkhaz could have joined the war effort to gain access to weapons, training, and safe places necessary for their survival.

The Abkhaz army formed during the war could offer these benefits of participation, but they were not available at the war's onset. Access to arms at the Abkhaz Guard barracks or the Gudauta military base was not comparable to that of Georgia's forces. Many Abkhaz mobilized unarmed or with unregistered weapons, mainly double-barreled hunting guns, stored in their homes. As a respondent recalls, "We collected weapons, and those who managed to get them went toward [the Georgian forces]. . . . Of course, tens [of us] who got the weapons were not enough," as the Georgian forces swiftly advanced through the territory. Immediate Abkhaz casualties further showed that mobilizing on the Abkhaz side would not increase fighters' prospects of survival.

Even the guards recruited and trained prior to the war were unprepared for this advance. Most were off duty at the time; those on duty were captured or bypassed by Georgian forces. "I was very troubled," an Abkhaz commander says, "[by] an order a few days before the war to let reservists . . . go and seize their automatic weapons" (interview in Khodzhaa 2009, 437). In this situation, defection to the stronger Georgian side would have offered greater safety than mobilization on the Abkhaz side. Still, defection was rare. People mobilized across areas of Abkhaz and Georgian territorial control, despite their limited access to weapons, although they could have joined Georgia, hid, or fled for their own safety.

These three approaches address different aspects of the historical (relative deprivation), social (collective action), and structural (strategic interaction) context of Abkhaz mobilization, but they do not explain the range of mobilization

roles. The relative deprivation and collective action approaches shed light on the history of the conflict and the social pressures involved, yet they do not account for why some Abkhaz mobilized and others did not despite shared grievances and social incentives. Strategic interaction suggests why some Abkhaz hid, fled, or defected but struggles with why others joined, as the Abkhaz side was weaker at the war's onset and joining it did not increase but rather jeopardized personal security. How, then, can we understand the mobilization decisions of the Abkhaz?

A Sociohistorical Approach

I find that earlier experiences of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and social networks at the time of mobilization were central to different Abkhaz decisions. In the context of intense uncertainty surrounding the first days of the war in Abkhazia, Abkhaz men and women turned to their familiar social networks to understand threat and how to act in response. National leaders, respected local authorities, friends, and relatives invoked shared understandings of the conflict to make sense of the Georgian advance. Decades of observing and participating in the conflict, with memories of the 1931 political status change, Georgian demographic expansion in Abkhazia, the closure of Abkhaz schools, and prohibition of the Abkhazian language, meant that the Abkhaz interpreted the Georgian advance as aimed at eradication of the Abkhaz position in society and Abkhazia as a unit separate from Georgia, one with an independent cultural history. As national leaders broadly articulated the threat, which local authorities then typically adapted to the needs of local defense across Abkhazia, these national and local actors produced a collective notion of the Georgian forces as threatening Abkhazia and the Abkhaz.

The emergence of collective threat framing affected how the ordinary Abkhaz perceived the threat of the Georgian advance. People realized that a war had started, rather than a clash similar to that of 1989 or a Georgian policing action, and that mobilization was necessary in response. But they did not know how to act. It was with immediate networks of family and friends that collective threat frames were consolidated into mobilization decisions, from attempts to flee to Russia, hide in Abkhazia, or defect to the Georgian side, alone or together with close family and friends, to collective mobilization to provide support or fight in one's locality or areas of utmost intensity. Small groups who mobilized together directed their mobilization to the protection of those segments of society that they perceived to be particularly threatened, from individual safety to the group at different levels of aggregation. The resulting trajectories were often surprising from the perspective of existing explanations. Directed by close family and friends, many politicized individuals fled Abkhazia to protect their own safety or that of

close family and friends, whereas others who had not actively participated in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before the war stayed in Abkhazia and mobilized on the weaker Abkhaz side.

What does this mean for our understanding of mobilization and broader processes of conflict? The recognition of uncertainty that regular people experience when violence and war break out in their communities challenges the assumption in existing approaches of potential participants' knowledge of risk and mobilization decisions based on this knowledge. Instead of calculating whether and how to mobilize based on a particular notion of risk, potential participants have to make sense of violence—who is threatened, by whom, and to what extent and for whom to mobilize in response. They come to perceive threat in different ways, and that affects their mobilization decisions. Placing variable threat perceptions at the center of our analysis of mobilization can help explain how individuals with similar backgrounds facing similar structural conditions adopt different roles in mobilization.

Therefore, we need to rethink our approaches to mobilization to better capture the process that relates uncertainty to a range of decisions about whether and in what capacity to mobilize. Prewar conflict experiences and social networks at the time of mobilization are critical in navigating the dilemmas of mobilization. Individuals are not isolated from the history of conflict of which they are a part. Their understandings of conflict and their roles in it change before, during, and after the war, and their social networks can shape distinct perceptions of threat under conditions of uncertainty, even when drawing on the same shared narrative of conflict, to direct mobilization to the segments of society that are perceived to be particularly threatened. Understanding how different threat perceptions emerge and affect mobilization decisions requires attention to sociohistorical factors.

It also requires broadening our concept of mobilization. Mobilization in civil war does not start with the recruitment of fighters into armed groups, but is part of a prolonged social process of observation of and participation in collective action, which spans the pre- to postwar stages of conflict. During the war, it entails not simply a decision to fight or not to fight, but a range of roles from fleeing, hiding, or defecting from one's group to offering indirect or direct support or fighting on behalf of one's group locally or in areas of utmost intensity. These roles can be adopted alone or, most commonly, together with others. Scholars of political violence and war have recognized this variation.[9] I add a previously overlooked dimension of *whom* mobilization decisions are taken for, whether one's own safety or that of family, friends, the community, or the broader group, which can be defined in ethnic, national, or other terms.

This range of roles reflects the difficult dilemmas that people confronted with intergroup violence and war face about whether, how, and for whom to mobilize, especially when their commitments to different segments of society compete for salience. The choice, for example, to protect one's family over the broader group in this context, points to the agency that people exercise over their decisions, even when constrained by armed actors and the social context (Baines and Paddon 2012; Barter 2014). Scholars of mobilization should be attentive to these dilemmas to better grasp different self- and other-regarding motivations underlying various participant and nonparticipant roles.

Understanding how ordinary people adopt a range of mobilization decisions is critical for our analysis of political violence and war in general as these decisions affect the structure, capacity, and patterns of violence by armed groups (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Staniland 2012; Viterna 2013). Why some clashes develop into wars and some killings acquire a mass character cannot be established without a full appreciation of ordinary people's participation in these processes. Had the ordinary Abkhaz not taken up arms, Georgia's advance in 1992 may not have turned into a war that lasted over a year and displaced most of the prewar Georgian population from Abkhazia, with postwar violence and no political resolution in sight.

More broadly, looking closely at mobilization before, during, and after civil war from the perspective of the actors involved provides insight into a range of conflict processes inaccessible through a focus on structural conditions or armed group strategy. How nonviolent contention turns violent and how conflicts unfold over time to transform actors' identities are some of these processes (Tarrow 2007; Wood 2015). In this book, I demonstrate how a detailed study of a single case that is difficult to explain with existing approaches can shed light on the broader processes of transformation of violence and mobilization, which have lasting effects on societies marked by conflict.