

Introduction in English

In the anthology *We witnessed the break-up – Six researchers on the final years of the USSR seen from the Caucasus*, a group of Swedish and Danish researchers recount their experiences in the Caucasus region during the final years of the Soviet Union and the period shortly after.

On Christmas Day 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union. The country that he had been the leader of, as General Secretary of the Communist party since 1985 and as President since 1990, had ceased to exist. The Soviet Union was established in 1922 on the ruins of the Russian Empire and came to include more or less the same territory. The crucial event that led up to the final collapse was the meeting in Minsk on December 8 1991, when the leaders of the Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine decided to establish an interstate organization, CIS, the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The country that had existed for almost 70 years as one single state disintegrated into 15 independent states. The cold war and the rivalry between the great powers USA and the USSR came to an end. The bi-polar system ended and the world became “uni-polar”, at least for a time. External actors poured in to profit from or to help in stabilizing the economic chaos that followed the collapse of the socialist plan economy. Cultural, social and ‘ordinary’ human contacts became possible without the travel restrictions, censoring, wire-tapping and reporting to the KGB.

When the Soviet Union had opened up under Gorbachev’s new policy of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) in the 1980s, new possibilities also opened up for researchers and journalists to travel, report and engage in field studies in places far from the two major cities Moscow and Leningrad (today St Petersburg). The Caucasus, like the Baltic region, was on the outskirts of the Soviet Union, but these two regions were to play an important role in the reform process that Gorbachev initiated in 1985 and that six years later led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The authors of this book report on what it was like to travel and do field research on the periphery of the Soviet Empire and the political processes that they witnessed. The authors are political scientist Ib Faurby, cultural geographer Lars Funch Hansen, researcher on minority issues Helen Krag, slavacist Märta-Lisa Magnusson, historian and Iranologist Søren Theisen and general linguist Karina Vamling. Since this period they have all closely followed the develop-

ment in the Caucasus region in struggles for independence, wars and ethno-political conflicts.

The contributions to the anthology are based on material collected during travel and fieldwork in both the South and North Caucasus. In their contributions the authors write about the new movements for independence in the Caucasus and increasing tensions with Moscow, how the Soviet structures at different levels were breaking down and the national cultures became increasingly important. They describe how premodern traditions still play a role, despite Soviet modernization, account for specific cultural features and similarities and also witness deepening ethnic antagonism. Though being a peripheral region of the USSR, the Caucasus played an important role in the gradual disintegration of the union and its collapse in December 1991.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 not many outside specialist circles had heard about the Caucasus. Few knew that on the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus range, there were three union republics of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. It was even less well-known that within these union republics and within the Russian Federation on the northern side of the Caucasus mountains there were several autonomous republics and regions. Today, names such as Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh have become widely known also outside specialist circles. This is not least due to the fact that they are associated with war and conflict. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 seven out of ten armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space have taken place in the Caucasus.

During the 70 years of its existence, contacts and communication with the outside world went through the union capital Moscow and the information flow to and from the Caucasus was limited. This was not only because of general Soviet censoring but also because the region had been transformed into a periphery in relation to Moscow. Western journalists stationed in Moscow travelled to the region only to report on spectacular events.

Not even at the end of the 1980s, when the process of disintegration was noticeable, did the Caucasus play a particularly salient role in Western media. Media's attention was focused on Moscow and president Gorbachev's reform program, dramatic developments in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet-backed communist regimes were beginning to lose power, the fall of the Berlin wall and German reunion, the independence movement in the Baltic republics and the power struggle in Moscow during the last months of the USSR.

The Caucasus was more widely known before the establishment of the Soviet Union than after. Interest in and exploration of the Caucasus has long

traditions among Scandinavian travellers and researchers. In the 19th century and up to the 1920s there was great interest in the region and a number of books and descriptions were published. Some names worthy of mention are Sven Hedin, Hans Kaarsberg, Knut Hamsun, Olof Lange, Fridtjof Nansen, Elisabet Anholm, and Anton Stuxberg.

Following the Russian revolution in 1917 three independent states emerged after the collapse of the Russian Empire: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. However, their independence did not last long. In 1922 all three states were integrated into the Soviet Union, the successor state of the Russian Empire. Following this development the possibilities for contact with the outside world became very limited.

In the 1980s there were several researchers on both sides of the Öresund strait who became interested in the Caucasus – this very special region where Europe and Asia meet, a geostrategically important mountain region between the Black and Caspian Seas, that Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks and Russians have tried for centuries to conquer and dominate.

Caucasus Studies in the Öresund region

Several research networks and research centres in the Öresund region have focused on the Caucasus. The first one out was *Danish Association for Research on the Caucasus* (DARC), established in 1997 with the aim to promote research and information on the Caucasus. In 2005 the *Center for Caucasus Studies at Öresund University* was founded and in 2016 the research platform *Russia and the Caucasus Regional Research* (RUCARR) was established at the Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University. In 2003, researchers who were active in DARC wrote and published the anthology *Korsvej og minefelt. Kultur og konflikt i Kaukasus* [Crossroads and minefields. Culture and Conflict in the Caucasus]. The Georgian language has been taught since 2001 and courses in Caucasus Studies as area studies were established at Malmö University in 2010. Several PhD dissertations on the Caucasus, its culture, languages and society, have been defended at universities in the Öresund region, which continues to play an important role in teaching and research on the Caucasus, both in Sweden and in a European context.

The articles in the anthology

The contributions to the anthology are written in Swedish and Danish and are illustrated with original photos taken by the authors during their travel and fieldwork in the South and North Caucasus. In the opening contribution Märta-

Lisa Magnusson, based on impressions from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia at the end of the 1980s, puts the question “*The Soviet people, did it exist?*”. In his chapter, Ib Faurby adopts a global as well as local perspective: *The disintegration of an Empire in a perspective from below*. The following chapter by Karina Vamling focuses on the role of language and identity in Georgia: *Four years that changed the identity of Georgia*. Søren Theisen travelled extensively in Armenia and writes about the Soviet legacy and pre-Soviet traditions in *A Little Trip Down Memory Lane. Travels in Armenia before and shortly after the break-up of the Soviet Union*. Lars Funch Hansen shares his impressions from Spitak, the Armenian town that was severely hit by an earthquake in 1988: *When the mountains wept. Spitak, December 1989. A photo story from a field visit in snow and ice in Armenia on the 1 year anniversary of the earthquake in 1988*. In her chapter *Forget it if you can* Helen Krag approaches silenced aspects of minority issues in the Caucasus. Lars Funch Hansen continues the topic of conflicts in the North Caucasus and focuses on the Prigorodnyj district and the conflict between North Ossetia and Ingushetia: “*He is a conflictologist*”. *Field research in North Caucasus at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union*. In the last chapter *How I conquered the North Caucasian stronghold Majkop* Karina Vamling illustrates challenges of doing field work in the Soviet period in her research on the structure and status of the Northwest Caucasian Circassian language.

Märta-Lisa Magnusson and Karina Vamling

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