

Borders and Border Spaces in the South Caucasus: From the Second Half of the 19th Century up to the 1920s

The recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 has created a new geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus, making border demarcation between Armenia and Azerbaijan inevitable. This, however, remains extremely complicated, not only because of the controversy over the historical affiliation of certain territories, but especially because of their strategic importance. The conflict's origins reach far back into history. The conquest and subsequent development of the Caucasus by the Tsarist Empire at the beginning of the 19th century is a history of constant border shifts. The creation of a functioning infrastructure in this peripheral region, where national or cultural internal borders no longer played a role, contributed to the emergence of economic spaces that did not necessarily correlate with actual or imagined national-geographical spaces. Therefore, the development of infrastructure repeatedly challenged, altered or destroyed existing notions of political, national and geographical borders.

The ambivalence between growing local needs and the state's infrastructure policies, coinciding with the ethnic divisions of the population, led to the emergence of self-contained ethno-religious spaces that acutely sharpened the ethnic identities and increased national tensions. Consequently, the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 left unresolved territorial disputes, which caused Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to declare their independence in 1918 without clear border divisions. The regional disputes were then inherited by the Bolsheviks, whose attempts to resolve the border conflicts managed to prevent further outbreaks for the time being, but did not contribute to a long-term solution.

With a methodological focus on the spatial analytical perspective, the presentation addresses the question of the extent to which the Tsarist and later Soviet policy of creating infrastructure and administrative order influenced the emergence of border spaces between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Of key importance is the question of what impact this policy had on the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations in the border regions, how it determined their everyday lives and to what extent it affected their mutual—conflict-ridden—relations.