

## **Abkhazia: A Broken Paradise**

GEORGI DERLUGUIAN

The conventional explanations of the Abkhazian independence war against the Republic of Georgia invariably dwell on the combination of local ancient hatreds and Moscow's secret meddling. This explanation is both incorrect and politically harmful. After all, what can be done if the hatreds are so ancient, and Russia, as any state faced with similar problems, might predictably have no option but to continue 'meddling' in its complicated Caucasus underbelly? To reframe these inherently pessimistic assumptions, let us revisit the typical arguments or 'facts' one hears from the participants in the Abkhazia conflict. Such analysis is by no means a pedantic exercise. Abkhazia's troubles are structurally similar to other smouldering separatist conflicts all over the Caucasus and the Balkans. By getting the record straight with Abkhazia, we may gain a deeper understanding of the ethnic troubles in the post-Communist peripheries such as Karabagh, Chechnya and Kosovo as well.

The social processes and historical structures commonly understood as background to the conflict, as this essay seeks to demonstrate, are not at all 'background' factors. Rather, they form the historically complex trajectory which at certain points could ignite – and also defuse – conflicts which are then configured in ethnic terms, as presumably confrontations between the Georgian majority, Abkhaz minority and interventionist Russia. The usual 'ancient hatreds' or, in a more fashionable academic twist, historically path-dependent explanation for these tensions is about as correct as blaming the contemporary violence in Northern Ireland on the long-standing theological dispute between the two branches of Western Christianity.

Let me throw in some hard 'facts': the Georgians are Orthodox Christian and so are, of course, the Russians – at least, most of them believe so on the basis of their getting to the church for baptisms, weddings, funerals, and occasionally on Easter, which totals on average two-and-a-half times a year (Furman, 1999). The religious practices and beliefs of the Abkhazes should be described as agnostic-syncretist while (to put it more bluntly) basically pagan (Abdushelishvili, Arutyunov and Kaloyev, 1994). The politicised sector among the Chechens, who for a brief period in the early 1990s (though not earlier and no longer today) passionately considered themselves brethren to the Abkhaz people, by all accounts are more serious Sunni Muslims than the happily syncretist Abkhaz. This is mostly

because the Chechens, who over the last two centuries have regularly engaged in confrontations with the Russian imperial machinery, came to stress Islam as their anti-imperial identity (Zelkina, 2000). In the Caucasus wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgians (or rather the Georgian elites) usually sided with Russia not simply because they were Christians, but because their Orthodox Christian background had culturally facilitated the access to Russian imperial careers. Curiously, the three men who in 1944 ordered and oversaw the deportation of the entire Chechen nation were the ethnic Georgians highly positioned in Moscow: Colonel Mikhail Gvishiani of NKVD; chief of the Soviet secret police Lavrenti Beria; and Joseph Stalin (Lieven, 1998).

In order to stay on track in this political maze, let us follow the wisdom of great historian Fernand Braudel (1986) and begin with the fundamental structures, literally with the fabulous soil and climate of Abkhazia.

### Geography

Abkhazia consists of about 250 kilometres of gorgeous winding beaches and densely green valleys climbing to the snowy peaks of the Caucasus that tower in the background. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Abkhazia was transformed into one of best vacation spots on earth (Ascherson, 1995). The relic pine forests and the lush sub-tropical vegetation of the coastal strip remind one of northern California, except that the beaches of Abkhazia are washed by the balmy, moderately salty and tideless Black sea. After Stalin and Khrushchev chose to have their summer *dachas* here, some of the most important Soviet-era entities such as the Ministry of Defence, the *Pravda* newspaper and the Union of Writers built on Abkhazia's coast imposing vacation retreats for their more privileged personnel. Further, Abkhazia's sub-tropical climate endows it with outstanding conditions for cash-crop plantations that can produce everything from tea and tangerines to walnuts and, most recently, kiwis. The seaside real estate and the agricultural hinterland of Abkhazia in relative value was even more precious than California – within the immense confines of the USSR, after all, there were very few moderately humid sub-tropical locales.

Just as in California or Florida, the prized landscape is actually man-made and very recent. Earlier in history Abkhazia, like much of the Caucasus, consisted of roadless mountain slopes covered with impenetrable thorny forests and unhealthy swamps in the lowlands (Khodarkovsky, 2002; Kurtynova, 1995). The exotic palm trees and citrus orchards were planted by Russian colonial botanists in the 1900s, and the coast was finally freed from endemic malaria only in the 1930s-1950s, thanks to the extensive public works and the spread of eucalyptuses. The newly created real-estate value of Abkhazia brought the blessing of exceptional wealth during the 1950s-1980s, in the times of late Soviet prosperity. But conflict over the possession of this man-made paradise also inflicted the curse of seemingly perpetual devastation after the collapse of the Soviet order, post-1989.

### Linguistics, Archaeology, Ethno-Genetics

Linguistically and anthropologically, the native Abkhazes belong to the North Caucasian group of peoples that also comprises the Adyghs (Adygeis, Circassians, Kabardins) and, more distantly, the Vainakhs (Chechens and Ingushes) and most Daghestanis (Abdushelishvili, Arutyunov and Kaloyev, 1994). To a considerable pride of its native speakers, the Abkhaz language is featured in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's hardest-sounding tongue. Indeed, it boasts more than sixty consonants to (depending on the dialect) just four, or even one, vowels. The verdict of patriotic Georgian scholars renders Abkhaz merely *patois*, a backward dialect of the Georgian language. Today, however, comparative linguists consider it proven that the languages of the North Caucasian group are entirely unrelated to any other language family in this part of the world, be it Indo-European, Afrasian (Semitic), Turkic or Kartvelian (a small endemic family that consists of Georgian proper, and the Svan, Mingrelian, and Laz languages).

An extravagant but apparently solid recent hypothesis claims to have discovered the traces of very distant (meta-family level) linguistic relation between the North Caucasian, Sino-Tibetan (Chinese, et al.) and the Na-Dene languages once spoken by California's natives (Diakonoff, 1999). But so far this newest scientific discovery has not been appropriated by the patriotic Abkhaz minds always looking out to claim additional allies in their struggles against Georgia. This could be just a matter of time, considering that Abkhazia's founding President, Dr. Vladislav Ardzinba, is himself a professional historical linguist who had once authored a respectable exploration of Hittite mythology.

The distant ancestors of North Caucasian peoples have inhabited the valleys of the North Caucasus apparently since the late Stone Age. The nationalists, of course, would take (or fiercely contest) this scholarly theory as a political argument directly related to the contemporary struggle for presumed historical rights (De Waal, 2003). Yet all it really says is that the mountain environment was so inaccessible and resource-poor that historical migrations and conquests bypassed the Caucasus ridge. This natural protected sanctuary preserved over centuries a mind-boggling variety of isolated languages and genetic pools.

Isolation apparently also explains the famous longevity of native Abkhazes, many of whom stay alive and healthy past the age of one hundred years. Between the 1970s and 1980s, the multi-disciplinary inquiry of Soviet and Western scholars into the Abkhaz gerontological phenomenon posited factors as diverse as the yogurt-based diet, climate, the low radiation produced by the local geological formations, or the special respect and social roles accorded by the Abkhaz culture to male and female elders (Hewitt, 1979). The most robust hypothesis suggests simply an advantageous genetic mutation that was sustained within a relatively small and durably contained population. (By curious coincidence, the other similar pool of highlander longevity genes is found in Karabagh.)



## History

Another manifestation of durable isolation is the relaxed religious syncretism of the Abkhazes. For centuries, first the Byzantine and then the Ottoman empires claimed to dominate the Caucasus Black Sea coast, and thus to spread their respective religions. The imperial claims, however, were mostly nominal. Neither the empires nor the Abkhaz princes had coercive resources or convincing rationale behind their effort to establish credible authority over the self-governing highlander communities scattered over this poor and inaccessible periphery of the larger Mediterranean (Ascherson, 1995; King, 2004). In Abkhazia, as elsewhere in the Caucasus, the traditional social organisation rested on self-sufficient village communities interwoven in extensive kinship networks. The convoluted feudal politics of princely families, i.e., the very staple of historical monographs, for centuries remained mostly superfluous to the pattern of social organization centered on autonomous villages. By default the majority of Abkhazes remained oblivious of their distant imperial rulers, and essentially continued to be traditional pagan believers under the thin veneer of intermixed Christianity and Islam.

As recently as 2007, I observed that sacred groves are still frequented for the annual sacrificial feasts, and the dead are buried in the backyard after long periods of funerary rites, rather than in the cemeteries (for a wonderfully literary description, see Iskander, 1983). On many occasions I heard the Abkhazes ridiculing the Islamic fervour displayed by the volunteers

from Chechnya and the Middle East who in 1992 rushed to participate in Abkhazia's independence struggle against the Christian Georgians. After the quiet departure of the foreign volunteers, the mosques they had begun building stay abandoned today. Except for a few Russian priests and the Russian Orthodox churches, there is little Christian presence either.

According to textbooks, Abkhazia became part of the Russian empire in 1810 when a particular branch of Abkhaz princely lineage, called the 'Chachbas' in Abkhaz or the 'Shervashidzes' in Georgian, swore vassalage to the Tsar. Prince Sefer-bei Chachba/Shervashidze shed the Islam of previous pro-Ottoman orientation, his scions re-invented their Orthodox Christian identity and soon they adopted the culture of the much larger Georgian nobility at Russia's imperial service (Suny, 1994). The upper-class shifts of vassal allegiance and corresponding cultural conversions had a long tradition in this corner of the world. Modern Georgian nationalists seeking to prove their claims to Abkhazia on medieval precedents invoke the experience of the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the feudal kingdom of Georgia was strong enough to pull the Abkhaz princes into its political and cultural orbit. We have no historical evidence to judge whether the medieval cultural bonds penetrated beyond the thin Abkhaz feudal elite. But the 19<sup>th</sup>-century situation is sufficiently documented to make it clear that the Russian, and by proxy the Georgian, presence in Abkhazia was a squarely diplomatic fiction until the final military defeat of independent highlander communities of the Caucasus in 1864.

### **Demography and Empire**

Until the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Abkhazia – approximately 100,000; the actual number is difficult to estimate due to the complete absence of any state authority and thus a lack of censuses prior to the 1890s – consisted solely of ethnic native Abkhazes and a few other closely related peoples (such as the Ubykhs) who no longer exist. In 1864, the sweeping push of Russian armies towards the Black Sea provoked among the highlanders a panic that led to mass exodus across the sea into the Ottoman lands: the territories of modern Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and even Kosovo (Ascherson, 1995; Lieven, 1998). This panic of apocalyptic proportions swept the entire expanse from Daghestan and Chechnya in the east Caucasus to the Circassian lands and Abkhazia in the western parts. Since Abkhazia was situated right on the Black Sea coast, the emigration was particularly massive there. At least half or perhaps as many as three-quarters of Abkhazes abandoned their native land in successive waves following the series of crushed rebellions between 1864 and 1878. Their neighbours to the north, the Ubykhs and Abadzekhs, left entirely. Most of them would assimilate in the Middle East. The majority of émigrés lost their languages, given the natural assimilation and the activist nationalist policies of Turkish Republic. The last speaker of the Ubykh language, a linguistic relative of the Abkhaz, died in Turkey in 1974. By bittersweet accident, the famous French folklorist Georges Dumezile himself married to an Ubykh woman, happened to be present to record the Ubykh language before it disappeared for good (King, 2004).

The anguish of exile instilled among the North Caucasian *muhajees* (Muslim refugees fleeing from the threatening infidels) a pro-Turkish, militantly Islamic identity directed against the Russian conquerors. The recent ethnic wars in Abkhazia, Chechnya and in the former Yugoslavia forcefully revived these feelings. Today almost three million people in Turkey claim to be the descendants of Abkhazes, Circassians and Chechens. Meanwhile, the Abkhazes who remained in their homeland grew very pro-Russian, a fact which has more than bemused the *mujahideen*, the Chechen and Middle Eastern volunteers who rushed to the land of their ancestors to join the Abkhaz independence struggle against Georgia in 1992. Invariably, the diaspora nationalisms tend to presume their ethnic cradles a repository of untainted national culture. But in the last century Abkhazia underwent profound changes that made the Abkhazes an ethnic minority of 17%, whose special status in the face of the Georgian majority of about 45% could be secured only by the counterbalancing factor of Russian state interests (Beissinger, 2002).

Abkhaz popular memory downplays the effects of the Russian conquest and overlooks the relationship between the arrival of Georgian, Armenian, Greek, and even several hundred Estonian settlers and the policies of colonial development (Shnirelman, 2001). Before 1917, the Russian administration had two objectives in Abkhazia – to create the revenue base by encouraging the introduction of cash-crop plantations (citruses, tobacco, tea); and, in a related effort, to placate the restless peasantry of western Georgia with land grants in depopulated Abkhazia.

The contemporary demographic explosion in the Georgian countryside was due to the spread of substantially more productive American corn (which replaced the traditional millet) between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was followed by the imposition of Russian rule in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, curbing the depredations of feudal warfare and slave trade. But the Russian rule in Georgia critically depended on the loyalty of the Georgian nobility (which at the time included the Abkhaz princes), whose numbers were multiplying even faster than the numbers of their serf peasants. At the time of the abolition of Georgian serfdom in the late 1860s, the Russian administration yielded to the native noblemen and gave the freed peasants even smaller land plots than in central Russia (Suny, 1994). Despite the land reclamation and resettlement into frontier territories such as Abkhazia, the rapid development of a monetised economy, cash-crop plantations and accelerating population growth by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century significantly worsened the plight of peasantry throughout the Caucasus.

When in 1905, and again in 1917, the Russian state experienced cataclysmic revolutionary breakdowns, social pressures erupted all over in the form of rural revolts, land seizures and banditry (for a classic statement of causality flowing from demographic pressure to revolutions, see Goldstone, 1991; specifically for the Russian Empire, see Suny, 1994, and Martin, 2001). In this multi-ethnic environment, the agrarian unrest evolved into numerous ethnic confrontations.

The complexities of demography, land tenure and revolutionary politics of the time became totally incomprehensible to the Caucasian men and women who grew up in the

radically different atmosphere of Soviet times. The historical memory of Caucasian peoples, imperfectly preserved in family lore and eventually shaped by modern national intellectuals, could say about the dreadful events of 1905 and 1917-1921 only “*They were killing us*”; but, of course, this crude simplification was repeated with tremendous emotion till it crystallised into a collective belief. When the Soviet state began breaking down in the late 1980s, these powerfully repressed traumatic traces began to emerge, and were consciously reenacted in the new and quite different historical circumstances.

It is utterly wrong to subscribe to the theories of the local nationalists and their followers, however numerous and vociferous they might be, in claiming that the recent conflicts were just the re-emergence of age-old hatreds (for a crucial document in this regard written in the early 1920s but first published only decades later, see Lisitsian, 1992; also De Waal, 2003). To ascribe this root to inter-ethnic tensions is a gross generalisation. In actuality, the relationship consists of myriad daily connections, ranging from personal cooperation in the form of marriages, friendships and often corrupt collaborations, to occasional conflicts such as professional competition or drunken brawls. These are usually resolved through normal daily procedures, though in particularly dire instances the police may adjudicate (Mars and Altman, 1983; Ledeneva, 1998).

The erroneous impression of a mythologised narrative of inter-ethnic conflict repeating itself is produced by two factors: the culturally-driven rationalisation of all kinds of conflict along the lines of traumatic historical memory; and the powerful institutionalisation of ethnicity by modern national states. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, another communist-created federation, offer poignant examples of an originally quite successful institutionalisation of troublesome ethnicities within the framework of federal republics. This sort of ethno-territorial constitutional arrangement became unmanageable and destructive when the socialist states attempted limited liberalisation and market reforms (Bunce, 1998).

## Politics

In 1918, as Russia was descending into the hell of civil war, Georgia became an independent state and rushed to impose its own administration over the ethnically problematic outlying dominions, including Abkhazia (Suny, 1994). The presumably irrational ethnic violence of those times is commonly blamed on the imperfections in character, class structures and institutions of East Europeans. We overlook the pivotal role of the League of Nations with its perfectly liberal and legalistic discourse in sponsoring the irruption of nationalist warfare upon the extensive ruins of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires. In 1919, the Great Powers gathered in Versailles set the newly independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia three standard conditions to be met within one year, in preparation to receiving the full recognition as nation-states: a) historical rights; b) the cultural affiliation of the populations, if necessary, decided via plebiscites; and c) effective occupation (Kazem-zadeh, 1951). The first clause prompted the new regimes to create the committees of national historians and anthropologists whose patriotic findings to this day are supplying

ammunition to the nationalist propaganda. The second, and especially the third, condition – the demand of effective occupation, directly adopted from the 1885 Berlin Conference on the colonial partition of Africa – sent the aspiring national states scrambling to hoist their flags and install garrisons in as many contested areas as possible before the deadline and the looming plebiscites. To compensate for the severe shortage of regular troops, local militias and irregulars of all sorts were recruited and armed in the process. The results were expectedly bloody (Mann, 2005).

Everywhere, be it Karabagh, Adjaria, Southern Ossetia or Abkhazia, the arrival of nationalist armed forces exacerbated the local ethnically-colored agrarian conflicts and led to outright massacres. The Abkhaz village militias sought an alternative source of weapons – the Russian Bolsheviks, who in their turn counted on transforming the disparate rural resistances into organised Communist rebellions against the nationalist regimes (Tsutsiev, 1998). After finally taking Georgia in 1921, the Bolsheviks united it with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Abkhazia into the shortlived Transcaucasian Federation (Suny, 1994). This historical precedent, rooted in the constitutional experimentation of the early Soviet era, would be stressed by Abkhaz leaders in the late 1980s to claim that they had always been equal to Georgia in status, and therefore could equally invoke the right to separation that was once inscribed in the Soviet federal constitution.

It is an understatement to say that the convoluted Soviet system of national federalism could function only due to the central institution of the Communist Party supported by the ruthless agency of the secret police (Martin, 2001). The Soviet federal system functioned largely on the common understandings and personal networks running through the party *apparatus*. From 1921-1936, the special and advantageous status of Abkhazia hinged on the personality of its hugely popular leader Nestor Lakoba, the semi-educated former honourable bandit of the 1905 generation, who by 1917 had spent years underground or in Tsarist prisons and became a Bolshevik convert with strong personal ties to Stalin (for a fictionalised account based on local folklore, see Iskander, 1983). For this reason, or perhaps more likely because Abkhazia was generally considered too backward and peripheral, Lakoba was able to postpone the collectivisation of Abkhaz peasantry. But in 1936 Lakoba died a strange sudden death several days after he had feasted with Lavrenti Beria, then the Communist leader of Georgia.

With Lakoba eliminated and posthumously declared an enemy of the people, Beria launched the 'Georgianisation' of Abkhazia with his trademark systematic vigour and ruthlessness. The 1936 USSR Constitution made Abkhazia an autonomous province subordinated to the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic rather than directly to Moscow. Large numbers of Georgian collective farmers and specialists were transferred to Abkhazia as part of a national campaign against backwardness (Viola, 1996). Meanwhile the Abkhaz language, that had only a decade earlier acquired its own alphabet, was replaced with the Georgian language in official usage. The nascent Abkhaz intelligentsia was decimated in Stalinist purges (Grant, 1995).

After 1953, the surviving Abkhaz intelligentsia (a few writers, historians and educators who had established themselves in their fields mostly in the earlier Soviet era) and the Abkhaz party cadres exploited the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria to reverse the tide. Ethnic demographics underwent an irreversible change. Without the Georgian and, to a lesser degree, the Armenian and the Russian labour force, the modern agriculture and the newly prominent resort sector of Abkhazia would have collapsed. But Abkhaz leaders successfully urged Khrushchev to revert to 'truly Leninist nationality policies', namely the state sponsorship of Abkhaz culture, affirmative action in university admissions, and administrative promotions favouring what the Soviet policy called 'titular nationality'. Not surprisingly, this provoked apprehension and resentment among the Georgians who during the reign of Stalin and Beria came to occupy crucial public positions in Abkhazia, ranging from government ministers to university instructors, collective farm managers and the police.

Normally such tensions were contained by bureaucratic procedures and the constraints imposed by official Soviet discourse on nationalities (Martin, 2001). In fact, after 1954 the bureaucratic containment of nationalist disruptions would become the norm for years to come, forcing the Georgian majority to adapt to these enforced protocols. But Georgia was one of the least compliant and quiescent Soviet republics in every respect (Beissinger, 2002). Georgia's history and agrarian social structures quite closely resembled those of Poland. Both countries boasted vibrant civil societies centred on bases of highly regarded artistic and professorial intelligentsia whose lineages reached back to the inordinately large and ambitious petty nobility of pre-socialist times (Bunce, 1998; King, 2001).

Since 1956, unruly Georgia no less than Poland has been a source of continuing tension for Moscow. Less prone to repression, the regimes of Khrushchev and Brezhnev were perennially apprehensive in the face of periodical outbursts of intelligentsia-led protests against central policies. Moscow typically responded with a mixed strategy of co-opting dissent where possible, and repressive measures against the nationalist intelligentsia. The latter approach inadvertently created more opportunities for further protest mobilisations (Suny, 1994). Moscow offered generous aid to the Georgian economy and promoted cultural institutions, while continuing to be blamed for every grievance. The Abkhaz population benefited even more, given that in this period its numbers stabilised at under 100,000, comprising 17% of Abkhazia's total population of approximately 450,000 citizens. The percentages of ethnic Russians, Armenians and Greeks were roughly comparable to Abkhaz (12-17% for each ethnic group), while the ethnic Georgians maintained a plurality of 40-46% (Suny, 1994; Grant, 1995). Each cycle of protest left in its wake newly actualised practices, ever-expanding networks and conciliatory political arrangements which ensured the recurrence of further protests. Both Georgian and Abkhaz protestors manoeuvred to select the issues and rhetoric that would resonate with national feelings, yet would avoid directly assaulting the core of Communist ideology and leave Moscow no alternative but respond harshly (Nodia, 2002).

As long as the Soviet state remained functioning in its post-1956 low-repression mode, the cycles of protest could offer a valuable bargaining opportunity for Georgian and Abkhaz officials, who were conniving almost openly with the dissidents and crowds. The recurrent cycles of protest focused on Abkhazia's political status took place every decade – in the late 1950s, 1968, in 1978-79, and again during spring and summer 1989. Each campaign served to embolden the protestors and wrangle substantial benefits intended to mollify seething collective passions. Ironically, it was at the pinnacle of Gorbachev's policy of democratisation that Moscow finally resolved to use coercion instead of the usual gratuitous pacification of ritualised Georgian-Abkhaz clashes (for the general theory of democratisation as a cause of ethnic violence, see Mann, 2005). In April 1989, Soviet paratroopers were sent to disperse the protesting crowds threatening to permanently occupy Tbilisi's central square (Beissinger, 2002). The paratroopers were armed with entrenching shovels as there was a shortage of batons, and apparently received no instruction in how to combat angry civilians. Nineteen protestors died in the clash, all of them women. Tbilisi's 'shovel massacre' initiated the first anti-Communist revolution of 1989. Over the events of a single tragic night the legitimacy of Georgia's Communist Party was destroyed, and the mercurial nationalist dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia suddenly became the likeliest contender for state power.

### **Revolution and War**

Two typical stories from Abkhazia illustrate the turmoil precipitated by the events of 1989 (here I draw upon personal field notes, recorded in 2000):

An Abkhaz farmer meets his old Georgian friend for a drink, but instead of the usual conversation about soccer and the best plans for profitably selling the tangerine crops, the Georgian begins passionately asserting that Georgia is the most civilised ancient nation in the Caucasus long suffering from Russian domination. When the Abkhaz fails to match the emotions of his friend, the latter grimly proposes the toast to the death of all Abkhazes.

The sly and graciously charismatic Djaba Ioseliani, whose picturesque life history included a long prison term for bank robberies, a subsequent doctorate in art history, and several well-crafted novels, comes to recruit Abkhazia's Georgians into his nationalist paramilitary organisation, the National Rescue Squad (Mkhedrioni). Ioseliani enjoyed his biggest mobilising success in the cluster of ethnic Georgian villages near the prized resort town of Gagra. These villages emerged during Beria's resettlement campaign in the late 1930s, and this memory continued to cause uneasiness locally. Ioseliani forcefully insisted that Gagra was no less a Georgian land than any other, calling Abkhazes a backward subset of Georgians whose provincial ego was deliberately boosted by Moscow's attempt to dominate Georgia. He furthermore announced the pending privatisation of land and the resorts of Abkhazia under the post-socialist reforms of the independent Georgian state, and hinted that membership in his paramilitary movement would count a lot in the privatisation of Soviet-era assets. The emboldened villagers joined en masse, receiving Mkhedrioni badges, pre-authorised titles to property, and a few guns. Two years later these villages



would be burnt to ground by the joint Abkhaz and Chechen forces, led by then little-known Shamil Basayev (from 1995-2004 the mastermind of hostage-takings in the hospital of Budennovsk town, a Moscow theatre, and a school in Beslan).

The small Abkhaz population of less than 100,000 felt beleaguered at the prospect of Georgian independence. Their experience of living in the state based on local patronage (which we usually call 'corruption') quite rightly suggested the conclusions: the majority ethnic group would sweep aside the minorities in competitive elections, and those who came to own the political posts would also monopolise the privatisation of state properties (Holmes, 1993; Urban, 1989; Vaksberg, 1991; Volkov, 2002). Further, the senior Abkhaz Communist leaders found themselves irrelevant when Gorbachev's actions removed from power in Moscow the most senior political patrons of the Abkhaz elite (Zaslavsky, 1993). In the subsequent disarray, the work of organising Abkhaz countermobilisation fell to the up-and-coming generation of local party *apparatchiks*. They pursued two goals: to preserve the Soviet-era ethnic quota system which prevented the local Georgians from scoring an automatic majority in the Abkhaz parliamentary elections; and to recruit external allies, Russian, Chechen, Armenian, or Middle Eastern, in order to counterbalance the overwhelming odds enjoyed by the Georgian majority.

The geographical compactness of the Abkhaz population made its political mobilisation relatively easy (see the impressive event-analysis database compiled by Beissinger, 2002). By contrast, the emerging political scene in Georgia was plagued by extreme fragmentation reminiscent of feudal patrimonial conflicts (excellent analyses of familial politics include Humphrey, 1991; Solnick, 1998; Hislope, 2002; Fisun, 2002; Ganey, 2006). During the

Soviet times, with the Communist Party as a common opponent, the inherited culture of Georgian petty nobility embedded in the high-status networks of intelligentsia and professionals helped to maintain a colourful and vibrant civil society. However, with the collapse of Soviet rule, the 'good families' of Georgia quarrelled shamefully over political positions and the spoils of empire. Besides, their social skills and habits cultivated at intellectual salons and at the famous Georgian banquets, proved quite inadequate to the tasks of state-building and war-making. The first post-Communist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose rise to power was largely due to his pedigree since he was the son of a famous national writer, was within a year overthrown by his erstwhile allies (Sunny, 1994). Eduard Shevardnadze, a senior Soviet-era statesman of legendary cunning, was then called upon to sort out the ensuing chaos. Shevardnadze eventually achieved a degree of pacification, but not before Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani, the two warlords who raised him to power, disgraced themselves through the military defeat in Abkhazia in 1992-93.

The origins and the course of this war are shrouded in dirty mysteries. In 1991 the Abkhaz leadership managed to make a power-sharing deal with Gamsakhurdia, who probably sought to avoid simultaneous wars on multiple fronts. The Abkhaz ethnic minority managed to preserve its vastly disproportionate share in the provincial parliament and state administration. But after toppling the first Georgian president, Kitovani and Ioseliani apparently wanted to score another military success; or perhaps they needed to take on the role of occupiers and reward their troops via plundering the richest part of Georgian territory. Using the numerous and admittedly irresponsible proclamations of Abkhazia's parliament as a pretext, the Georgian warlords launched their blitzkrieg in August 1992. Their campaign almost immediately got bogged down – either due to the threat of Russian troops still stationed in Abkhazia or, as many witnesses suggest, because the Georgian paramilitaries began looting. It was most likely a combination of both factors. The Abkhaz forces thus acquired the necessary breathing space to organise their defences.

There can be no doubt that the Abkhazes were aided by the Russian military. Despite the romantic stories of Chechen and Kabardin volunteers valiantly crossing the mountains on foot to help their Abkhaz brethren, the majority of North Caucasus and Cossack volunteers were openly recruited on Russian territory, transported to the Abkhaz border by bus, trained and armed by the Russian officers. The Chechen detachment of Shamil Basayev received its training on the grounds of the former *dacha* of Khrushchev in Pitsunda, which still belongs to the Russian Presidential Administration. The motives and the institutional movers of Russian covert aid are less easily identifiable. Journalists have suggested reasons ranging from sophisticated geo-strategic calculations to purported revenge against Shevardnadze, whom Russian generals accused of selling East Germany to the NATO (De Waal, 2003).

With this as with all conspiracy theories, the major point of doubt is the assumption of a unified agency capable of long-term calculations under conditions of radical uncertainty, and the seamless execution of plans (for an elaboration of this critique, see Derluigan, 2001). The war in Abkhazia coincided with President Yeltsin's war on his parliament, where,

incidentally, the Abkhaz leaders had many friends among the anti-Yeltsin nationalists. Further, it is a normally neglected fact that in the summer and autumn of 1992, the Russian North Caucasus teetered on the brink of open rebellion against Moscow. The Autonomous Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria experienced a near-successful nationalist revolution modelled on the earlier Chechen example; North Ossetia fought a brief but extremely cruel border war with Ingushetia; the Adygeis on the Black Sea coast rallied for the restoration of their national enclave abolished in the mid-1950s; and despite these aggressive and obdurate communitarian fissures, the audacious project of a pan-Caucasian Mountain Republic did not seem too fantastic a scheme. Against this backdrop we must either presume that the acts of Moscow were guided by a secret genius enforcing a devilishly complicated plan, or deduce less hyperbolically that the events followed an inherently chaotic trajectory consisting of myriad contradictory acts and motivations that in the end benefited Moscow as still the most powerful player on the field.

The Abkhaz war of independence in 1992-93 consisted of sporadic inconclusive battles, protracted periods of stalemate, and peace agreements broken each time one or other side (or even an individual commander) saw a chance to score victory. It was accompanied by looting and atrocities against civilians by all combatants. In the rear of both armies, Georgian or Abkhaz civilians committed paranoid acts of arson, and executions by lynch mobs were directed against suspected spies, traitors or simply for the sake of symbolic revenge (Bourdieu, 1973) each time a dead soldier was brought home for his funeral. It must be acknowledged that after several generations of living side by side, the Abkhazes and the Georgians shared a common culture, common territory, common networks created through marriage and working together. It was normal practice to speak at least two, usually three, languages (Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian). Therefore the war-induced separation was profoundly traumatic, for in psychological terms it amounted to committing gruesome violence upon a part of oneself in the name of destroying one's 'other'. Political scientist Stathis Kalyvas (2006) has compellingly argued that such modes of apparent insanity in fact follow the logic of control in contested areas during civil wars.

These purportedly random atrocities became a central part of organised warfare towards the end of the war in September-October 1993, when the joint Abkhaz and external volunteer forces tricked the Georgian defences and rapidly captured the capital of Suhum and the rest of Abkhazia. Before the war, only 7% of Suhum's population was ethnic Abkhaz, while the richest agricultural district of Gali in southern Abkhazia was entirely Georgian (Nodia, 2002). Evidently, the Abkhaz war leaders calculated that given their limited manpower it would be impossible to control the areas of predominantly Georgian population; hence it was better that there be no population at all to control. Ethnic cleansing has its own perverse logic (Mann, 2005; Kalyvas, 2006). The atrocities must be visible and sadistic enough to produce the wave of panic that will compel large populations to flee before a small band of fighters who would not otherwise be able to prevent resistance in their rear. A brutally simple maximisation of return on effort, which results in another 'banality of evil' (Arendt, 1964).

### Future Possibilities

Stating his vision of what social science must achieve, Arthur Stinchcombe (1997) argues that the key lies in the ability to trace the social mechanisms and the resulting political and cultural paths by which societies emerge from their pasts into their futures. Where, given the preceding analysis, might we locate structural configurations that can embed the futures of Abkhazia?

My main contention is that the conflict in Abkhazia is akin to revolutions and civil wars. The conflict was 'frozen' by the military ability of Abkhaz forces and their Russian backers to defeat the Georgian forces, and by the diplomatic ability of Georgia, an internationally recognised sovereign state with a secure seat in the United Nations, to brand the Abkhaz rebellion separatist and illegitimate. The juxtaposition of military power and diplomatic norms produced one of several such 'frozen' conflicts that abounded in the former Soviet Caucasus. Since 1993, Abkhazia has existed as a *de facto* state (or as an unacknowledged protectorate of Russia) while being subjected to an international economic and political blockade because of Georgia's adamant refusal to recognise the Abkhazian secession.

Elsewhere, Stinchcombe (1999) suggests that revolutions come to an end when the degree of political uncertainty is reduced by building enough bargains into a structure of power that can sustain such bargains. It seems, then, that Abkhazia, like many similarly rebellious provinces in the former USSR (and in the former Yugoslavia) has not ended. In other words, 'frozen' conflict is civil war without conclusion.

Stinchcombe summarises the structures ending revolutions and civil wars as an analytical continuum, ranging from conservative authoritarianism ("Thermidor"), totalitarianism, *caudillismo*, occupation government, democracy, and national independence. Let us consider the likelihood of these options in turn, regarding Abkhazia.

Totalitarianism is not an option, for two major reasons. First, international norms that are strongly antithetical to totalitarian dictatorships seem today to be of secondary importance. After all, North Korea still exists; and a coercively unified Iraq would have existed if international norms were not manipulated by the American government. Second, it takes a *functioning* state to sustain a totalitarian regime. This is obviously not the case in Abkhazia or Georgia.

Ironically, democracy is not a realistic option either, for largely the same reason – this kind of regime also requires extensive state capacities if it is to be sustained. In the absence of strong state structures (Fisun, 2002; Ganev, 2005), the prevalent if not the sole form of government in the region is what Stinchcombe terms *caudillismo*: personalistic rule through the networks of loyalties glued by venality, mutual complicity, nepotism – and ethnicity in its most localised 'tribal' and regionalist forms. However, in the example of Abkhazia, *caudillismo* alone would not solve the conflict.

We are left with the suggested options of national independence and its obverse, foreign occupation. In another typical irony, what one side of the conflict would consider national

independence another would view as foreign occupation. Since the 2003 'Roses Revolution' in Georgia (the peaceful revolt that displaced President Eduard Shevardnadze), the new energetic president Mikheil Saakashvili has been betting on American aid and political patronage. For the visit of the American president, a central street in Georgia's capital of Tbilisi was renamed 'George W. Bush Avenue'. Indeed, today Georgian troops wear American uniforms and serve alongside their American comrades in Iraq. The Georgian expeditionary force of 2000 men now stands as the fourth-largest contribution to the US-led 'Coalition of the Willing' – after Britain and Australia. In a display of wry humour, the Pentagon entrusted the training of Georgian soldiers to the National Guard of the state of Georgia in the American south. Expectedly, Abkhazia and Russia viewed this build-up with extreme suspicion.

The constellation of political factors seems now downright threatening. Besides the personal ambition of Georgia's young new president who promised his domestic constituency a speedy re-unification of Georgian territory, the looming recognition of Kosovo's independence was the major factor in the 'un-freezing' of Abkhazia conflict. Moscow under President Putin has been increasingly nationalist and assertive internationally. The windfall of foreign earnings from Russian energy exports is not the cause; rather, it has been a vital resource in the policies of the Putin administration. The main reason is that Russian elites no longer subscribe to the vision of global integration. Instead, they have become overtly cynical regarding international norms that they now consider merely a front for American imperial ambitions. In the minds of the Russian political elite, American-led 'humanitarian interventions' in Kosovo and the invasion of Iraq have proven that the configurations of autonomy are scripted and shaped by the calculus of power, and that Moscow cannot expect a kind invitation to join the club of America's favoured allies. On his side, Georgia's President Saakashvili feels pressured by his own often bombastic declarations and promises of rapid integration into the structures of NATO and the European Union. Further, the looming departure of George W. Bush from the American presidency after 2008 adds special urgency to Saakashvili's plans, as he is understandably afraid of losing his major foreign patron.

Recently this newest reenactment of the Great Game was subject to yet another aggravating catalyst: the 2014 Winter Olympics, to be hosted by Russia. This symbolic victory took President Putin on a personal trip to Guatemala, where he charmed the International Olympic Committee by addressing them in English and French (acquired in addition to his well-known fluency in German that dates back to his days as a KGB operative during the Cold War). The supposedly unproblematic sporting extravaganza has direct relevance to the conflict over Abkhazia described in this essay, because the 2014 Winter Olympics will take place in the Russian resort town of Sochi, immediately bordering on Abkhazia. The Russian government has already pledged to invest the equivalent of \$12 billion in the 'development' of Sochi. Real-estate prices consequently have begun to escalate at shocking speed, and Russian developers and speculators have started assessing, with very pragmatic interest, the once semi-forgotten stretch of prized beaches that line Abkhazia. In the face of the investment boom associated with Olympic preparations, the

Abkhaz elites and many enterprising citizens are scrambling to secure their share of profits. They are torn between the fear of being colonised by the mighty Russian capitalists and the prospect of missing this great opportunity for financial benefit. Whatever the outcome of these new struggles for the possession of Abkhazia, the Olympic project would clearly ensure the integration of the separatist enclave with Russia. But first, it seems, there will be another war because Georgia cannot be expected to simply stand by and witness Abkhazia being further 'developed' into an extension of the Sochi tourist complex. Regardless of whoever finally regains control of this earthly paradise – Russia, Georgia or the indigenous Abkhazes – the feat will not be achieved without another cycle of fierce inter-ethnic violence.

## References

- Abdushelishvili M.G., S.A. Arutyunov and B.A. Kaloyev. *Narody Kavkaza: antropologia, lingvistika, hozyaystvo* [The Peoples of the Caucasus: Anthropology, Linguistics, Traditional Economy] (Institut antropologii i etnologii RAN, 1994, Moscow).
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking Press, 1964, New York).
- Ascherson, Neal. *Black Sea* (Jonathan Cape, 1995, London).
- Beissinger, Mark. *Nationalist Mobilisation and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge University Press, 2002, New York).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Algerian Subproletariate". In (ed.) I.W. Zartman, *Man, State, and Society in the Contemporary Maghreb* (Pall Mall, 1973, London), pp. 83-89.
- Braudel, Fernand. *Afterthoughts on Material Civilisation and Capitalism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, Baltimore).
- Bunce, Valerie. *Subversive Institutions: The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, New York).
- Derluguian, Georgi. "Why Adjara Is Not Like Bosnia: Historical Determinants, Human Agency, and Contingency in the Chaotic Transition". In (ed.) George Katsiaficas, *After the Fall: 1989 and the Future of Freedom* (Routledge, 2001, New York), pp. 103-24.
- De Waal, Thomas. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2003, New York).
- Diakonoff, Igor M. *The Paths of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999, Cambridge).
- Fisun, Oleksandr. "Politiko-rezhimnaia transformatsia Ukrainy: dilemmy neopatrimonialnogo razvitiia" [The Political-Regime Transformation in Ukraine: Dilemmas of Neo-patrimonial Development]. In *Stylos* (Kyiv), pp. 4-14 (2002).
- Furman, Dmitry E. (ed.). *Chechnia i Rossiia: obschestva i gosudarstva* [Chechnya and Russia: Societies and States] (Polinform-Talbur, 1999, Moscow).
- Ganev, Venelin. "Ballots, Bribes and State Building in Bulgaria". In *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 75-89 (2006).
- Goldstone, Jack. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (University of California Press, 1991, Berkeley).

- Gould, Roger V. "Patron-Client Ties, State Centralisation and the Whiskey Rebellion". In *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102, No. 2, pp. 400-29 (1996).
- Grant, Bruce. *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton University Press, 1995, Princeton).
- Hewitt, B.G., with Z.K. Khiba. *The Abkhaz* (North-Holland, 1979, Amsterdam).
- Hislope, Robert. "Organised Crime in a Disorganised State". In *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 49, No. 3, (May/June 2002).
- Holmes, Leslie. *The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 1993, Oxford).
- Humphrey, Caroline. "Icebergs", Barter, and the Mafia in Provincial Russia". In *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (April 1991).
- Iskander, Fazil. *Sandro of Chegem: A Novel*. Trans. Susan Brownsberger (New York: Vintage Books, 1993, New York).
- Kalyvas, Stathis. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006, New York).
- Kazem-zadeh, Firuz. *The Struggle for Transcaucasia, 1917-1921* (Philosophical Library, 1951, New York).
- Khodarkovsky, Michael. *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Indiana University Press, 2002, Bloomington).
- King, Charles. *The Black Sea: A History*. New York: (Oxford University Press, 2004, New York).
- King, Lawrence P. "Making Markets: A Comparative Study of Post-Communist Managerial Strategies in Central Europe". In *Theory and Society* 30, pp. 493-538 (2001).
- Kurtynova-Derluguian, Liubov. *Tsar's Abolitionists: The Russian Suppression of Slave Trade in the Caucasus, 1801-1864*. Doctoral dissertation, Department of History (SUNY Binghamton), 1995.
- Ledeneva, Alena. *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, Cambridge).
- Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: The Tombstone of Russian Power* (Yale University Press, 1998, New Haven).
- Lisitsian, Stepan. *Armyane Nagornogo Karabaha* [The Armenians of Mountainous Karabagh] (Izdatelstvo Erevanskogo Universiteta, 1992, Yerevan).
- Mann, Michael. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge University Press, 2005, Cambridge).
- Markoff, John. *The Great Wave of Democracy in Historical Perspective* (Cornell University Press, 1995, Ithaca).
- Mars, Gerald and Yochanan Altman. "The Cultural Bases of Soviet Georgia's Second Economy". In *Soviet Studies* XXXV, No. 4, pp. 546-60 (October 1983).
- Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (Cornell University Press, 2001, Ithaca).
- Nodia, Ghia. "Conflict and Regional Security in the Caucasus". Paper presented at the Yale Center for the Study of Globalisation, 22 September 2002.
- Reno, William. *Warlord Politics and African States* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, Boulder).
- Shnirelman, Victor A. *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (National Museum of Ethnology, 2001, Osaka).
- Solnick, Steven L. *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Harvard University Press, 1998, Cambridge).

Stinchcombe, Arthur. "Tilly on the Past as a Sequence of Futures". Review essay in *Charles Tilly: Roads from Past to Future* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, Lanham).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Ending Revolutions and Building New Governments". In *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, pp. 49-73 (1999).

Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Making of the Georgian Nation* [2<sup>nd</sup>.edn.] (Indiana University Press, 1994, Bloomington).

Szelényi, Iván, with Robert Manchin et al. *Socialist Entrepreneurs: Embourgeoisement in Rural Hungary* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, Madison).

Tilly, Charles. *European Revolutions, 1492-1992* (Blackwell, 1993, Oxford).

Tsutsiyev, Artur. *Osetino-ingushskii konflikt (1992- ....) ego predystoria i factory razvitiya* [The Ossetino-Ingush Conflict, 1992-...: Antecedents and Developmental Factors] (ROSSPEN, 1998, Moscow).

Urban, Michael. *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic, 1966-86* (Cambridge University Press, 1989, New York).

Vaksberg, Arkady. *The Soviet Mafia* (St. Martin's Press, 1991, New York).

Viola, Lynne. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivisation and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 1996, New York).

Volkov, Vadim. *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Cornell University Press, 2002, Ithaca).

Woodruff, David. *Money Unmade: Barter and the Fate of Russian Capitalism* (Cornell University Press, 1999, Ithaca).

Zaslavsky, Victor. "Success and Collapse: Traditional Soviet Nationality Policy". In (eds.) Bremmer, Ian and Ray Taras, *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge University Press, 1993, Cambridge), pp. 29-42.

Zelkina, Anna. *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (Hurst & Co., 2000, London).