

THE FORGOTTEN ABKHAZIA

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The year 2000 brought Abkhazia one major (though likely transient) improvement. Russian authorities somewhat relaxed border-crossing controls, allowing males of combat age to travel into Abkhazia and back. Russia's relaxation of border crossing is evidently related to the war in Chechnya. Moscow is trying to influence the Georgian government, which stubbornly proclaims neutrality and maintains a pretty lax regime on Georgia's mountain border with Chechnya, a few hundred miles to the east of Abkhazia. Russia is very unhappy with the Chechen refugees and, as it claims, fighters crossing to and from Georgia, while the Georgians are equally convinced that fighters and weapons enter Abkhazia, Georgia's own separatist province, from Russian territory.

The story is more complicated than conventional military-political analyses of ethnic wars portray it to be. The usual "ancient hatreds" explanation routinely found in Western, Russian or even Georgian media is about as correct as blaming contemporary violence in Northern Ireland on long-standing theological disputes between the branches of Western Christianity. To begin with, all such conflicts have traceable trajectories, however complicated and contingent. They are certainly not static perennial confrontations of national interests or immutable civilizations. For the buffs of Huntingtonian geopolitical simplicity, 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 it to the extent of getting to the church for baptisms, weddings, funerals and Easter festivities, on average roughly twice a year. The religious practices and beliefs of Abkhazians should be described as agnostic-syncretist and predominantly pagan (I shall soon explain why). The Chechens are more serious Sunni Muslims mostly because the regular confrontations with the Russian imperial machinery have brutally reminded them of their separate identity. In the Caucasus wars of the past, Georgians usually sided with Russia not because they were Christians but because Christianity had

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facilitated their cultural access to Russian imperial careers. Curiously, the three men that in 1944 ordered and oversaw the deportation of the entire Chechen nation were all ethnic Georgians highly positioned in Moscow: the secret police Colonel Gvishiani, chief of Soviet secret police Lavrenti Beria, and Joseph Stalin. Today Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze (needless to say, once very highly positioned in Moscow) desperately seeks to consolidate his fledgling state power by joining the European Union and NATO. Since European leaders are currently critical of the Russian war in Chechnya, Shevardnadze plays a complicated game of neutrality, all along hinting to his numerous Western acquaintances that the post-communist transition in Georgia requires protection and help probably more than Poland or Estonia. The military separation of Abkhazia from Georgia in 1993 remains perhaps the biggest debacle of Shevardnadze's post-Soviet political career.

Traveling to Abkhazia today requires walking the single bridge over the Psou River. This bottleneck is currently Abkhazia's only normal connection to the outside world. Otherwise one would have to scale steep mountain ridges on foot or risk the perils of small boat navigation on the Black Sea, avoiding the Russian and Georgian border guard patrols. In personal terms, the fleeting window of opportunity that Russian-Georgian politics opened in 2000 allowed me a chance to revisit a research site and simply the pleasure of making good on a long-standing invitation from a family of friends in Abkhazia. Accompanying us was Igor, a Russian anthropologist and now (given the growing official chauvinism in Russia) a public propagator of multiculturalism and interethnic toleration. He is a cowardly lion of his professional calling: that is, Igor believes himself to be quite cowardly and lazy in daily life but every time the need arises he stands up and works tirelessly, sometimes taking personal risks. In a memorable instance, when the two of us got detained at the Russian military police roadblock leaving Chechnya with a bagful of Chechen resistance videotapes and leaflets, Igor's decidedly harmless demeanor and likely also his blond Slavic appearance played a major role in convincing the suspicious sergeant of our purely scientific interests. After a very tense fifteen minutes of us standing faces to the wall, the sergeant became convinced that we were neither Chechen fighters nor journalists. Putting his gun on safety catch, he even thanked us for the bottle of vodka that he ended up "confiscating" and, shrugging his shoulders, advised us to hide better our bagful of scientific data before the next roadblock. When Igor received a Fulbright fellowship to come to the US for a year, he ended up bringing his whole family and staying with us in Chicago for eight months—while we were demolishing and rebuilding our newly-bought house, forcing us all (two families with four children altogether) to live for a while amidst the construction on very tight budgets. Such experiences are the way to make or break durable relationships. In our case it was the latter.

Much of the credit goes to Igor's wife Rita, who is endowed with a wonderful talent for dispensing good humor and psychological stability day after day. Rita's mother is an ethnic Abkhazian, a sturdy and humorous peasant woman of the kind found in the Mediterranean. In her late eighties, she remains quite disposed to

have a glass or two of homemade wine and then encourage the youngsters to dance. Her late husband, Rita's father, was an ethnic Georgian and the first agronomer to settle in the village of Ldza'a when the tobacco-growing collective farm was first created there in the late 1930s. The faultline of ethnic war thus went right across Rita's family. One of her relatives was killed by a deranged mob (who had been neighbors under regular circumstances) who were looking for enemy infiltrators; another was murdered apparently by marauders. Many among her relatives whose nationality in Soviet-era passports was listed as Georgian became refugees. Others, including Rita's younger brother Revaz, joined the Abkhaz volunteer units. In fact it was their mother's decision, since she wisely reasoned that in such a calamitous feud joining one of the sides would be safer than trying to stay neutral and thus eliciting suspicions in the village. Rita has lived with her husband in Russia since before the war. In the passport her nationality is listed as Georgian. When we finally crossed the river Psou, the young soldier at the first Abkhazian roadblock looked into Rita's passport with bewilderment. She stared back at him with a mixture of tenderness and defiance: "So, kid, anything wrong?" The soldier shouted something into the sandbagged booth in the incredibly hard-sounding Abkhazian language. Undaunted, Rita added something else in the same incredible Abkhazian. When the soldier looked perplexed, Igor quietly laughed, explaining to me: "It works every time. Whenever they see that Rita's nationality is Georgian, she asks in Abkhazian to call Colonel Margania, their commander, and report that they are annoying his aunt who comes to visit her dear nephew." Col. Margania, or simply Zurik, belongs to the Abkhazian branch of the family. He served in the Soviet Border Guards before the dissolution of the USSR, and then became an Abkhazian war chief. So much for the tragic illogics of ethnic wars.

However crazy it might sound, I took my sons on this trip as a vacation. For the boys (they are 10 and 11 now) it was an adventure—crossing the Russian-Abkhazian border on foot, with an Armenian porter carrying our luggage on a squeaky cart. (Once, before the war, he ran a seaside café and owned a beautiful house with a rose garden that in 1992–1993 happened to lie too close to the battlefield.) I sternly told the kids to keep quiet as we pass by the soldiers, but nonetheless when the officer asked if we were carrying any weapons, Stepan, the outspoken younger one, looked at him earnestly and asked: "Why, are you afraid of us?" The astonished officer smiled uneasily and uttered: "No, it's you who should be afraid of me." On the Abkhazian side we were attacked by a horde of unshaven private taxi drivers, and ended up in a decrepit van (almost all cars in Abkhazia date back to the pre-1992 war Soviet times). The driver was from the village of Ldza'a where we were heading and knew the exact home to which we were going. In the back of his van we discovered a rather charming white goat, though in the end all of our bags ended up marked with white wool and goat droppings. The view had a densely rustic quality that would have been charming, too, had it not been for the bullet-poked and burnt houses every now and then and other signs of recent battles, and of course the mostly deserted beaches. When the boys got back to their school in a Chicago suburb, they bragged that they spent

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their summer in a country that none of their classmates had ever heard of and which has no government. Interestingly, in the middle of our retreat a journalist from *Moscow News* tracked me down to get an expert interview on the Caucasus ethnic conflicts. But his first question was: “Wouldn’t you rather be in Malibu or the Bahamas than HERE?!” Well, I didn’t tell him that as an assistant professor I couldn’t afford to spend a week, let alone a whole month, in the Bahamas. And, besides, where else in the world would we have the former Nikita Khrushchev’s beach almost entirely to ourselves?

Rita’s family has an old house with a garden plot of half a hectare—huge by Soviet standards. Curiously, everyone seemed to have had the garden plots of such or even bigger size throughout the era of supposedly strict Soviet collectivization. Apparently the Soviet state was not as uniformly strong as the totalitarian paradigm portrayed it. The family has two cows, chickens, ducks, and even a peacock (just for fun). In the backyard, there is a tangerine grove, peach, pomegranate and fig trees, and a densely weeded watermelon patch with plenty of harmless watersnakes crawling ashore from the nearby canal. Elsewhere in a nearby field they cultivate maize and beans—two originally American Indian crops which since the eighteenth century have been Georgian and Abkhazian staples. Apparently (though we have no demographic data whatsoever for the earlier epochs), maize and beans contributed very substantially to enlarging the Abkhaz population, as well as many other highlander peoples of the Caucasus. Population growth enabled them to recover from the depredations of the long-standing highlands feud and slave trade (the Ottoman harems and the Egyptian mamelukes were among the chief destinations for Abkhazian and other Circassian slaves). Maize and beans, rendering possible the feeding of several times more people, also played a role in fighting the Russian invasion for three generations. The food today is once again quite simple—no ice cream and little butter, just bread, occasionally some fish (a skate or Black Sea mackerel), spicy vegetable stew, always a dense maize porridge (in Abkhazia they put it right on the table which is washed and scrubbed after every meal), plus the homemade white cheese and lots of homemade wine (a year old and pretty sour by August) and a much better but also much more potent (60 to 70 percent alcohol) “chacha”—the tangerine moonshine, that when made properly resembles a good whiskey. Since the last war, the men have been drinking too much, as many women complain. Many are psychologically traumatized; besides there is nothing for them to do, especially during the winter months. All life is gone; there are no more noisy and profitable tourists, and there is not much TV either (the supply of electricity is sporadic, the old TV sets once broken cannot be repaired, and unlike Russia, the people here are too poor to buy new Japanese TV sets). Despite appearances, Abkhazia is not as happily rustic as it seems. The people are glad they have survived but they obviously want functioning schools, shops, cinemas, and jobs with regular and decent wages. Many people dream of escaping from this subtropical paradise.

Of course, unlike us (the temporary visitors), the native residents pay little attention to the landscape and curiosities such as sacred groves with dried meat

hanging from ancient oak trees. In front of our friends' house stands a special gazebo-like structure covered with red tiles and with walls of woven twigs. It is the men's house—the place where the men of the house can entertain or, if need be, keep overnight their male guests without intruding into the female-dominated house proper. In the backyard there stands the rain-stained vaulted crypt. It was built over a century ago by the previous owners of the land plot, who sold it in the 1920s. The structure is covered with dense vegetation and cobwebs, but inside there is a table with a jug of wine to the spirits of the dead. Many people have guns at home, and our neighbors next door had a whole arsenal ranging from modern hand grenades to the ancestral sabers and silver-clad daggers. My boys were terribly impressed when Annetta, the gracious coquette 6-year-old daughter of our neighbors, invited them to play and showed all those toys. Annetta belongs to a rich family whose patriarch was once the resort photographer. For many years his spot was up in the mountains, by the gorgeous Alpine Lake with a view of comrade Stalin's vacation dacha in the backdrop. Of course, for such a special view he could charge very special prices to the never-ending stream of Russian tourists delivered by busload. (Maintaining such a lucrative place must have also involved corrupt connections, not only among the local police but among organized crime, too.) The family is ethnic Georgian but they survived the war almost unscathed by successfully playing village-level diplomacy. Their greatest troubles came when they were twice robbed by the Chechen and Kabardin volunteers, who demanded contributions to the war efforts and the money to transport back to their countries the dead bodies of their fallen comrades. But this family preserved its main asset—the two-storied spacious home with all modern amenities that in America would surely cost a fortune. Today their Soviet-era capital is reinvested into a mill, a large farm with twenty or so mostly Russian farmhands who work for food, wine, and good climate.

As long as you stay in Abkhazia, you cannot rid yourself of the question—what evil struck here? It is not a philosophical question; it is much on the minds of the people must live there. The conventional explanation, as mentioned in the beginning, stresses the combination of local ancient hatreds and Moscow's secret meddling. I argue that this explanation is incorrect and detrimental to finding a durable peaceful solution. After all, there is nothing to be done if the hatreds are so ancient, and if Russia, as any state faced with similar problems, can surely be expected to meddle in its Caucasian underbelly? To reframe these inherently pessimistic assumptions, at this point let us shift the focus of narrative and revisit the background and the typical arguments or presumed "facts" one hears from the opponents in the Abkhazia conflict. It is by no means a pedantic exercise. Abkhazia's troubles are structurally similar to other smoldering separatist conflicts all over the Caucasus and the Balkans. By getting the record straight with Abkhazia, we may also gain a better understanding of Karabagh and Kosovo.

Geography

Abkhazia consists of about 250 kilometers of gorgeous winding beaches and densely green valleys climbing to the snowy peaks of the Caucasus that tower in

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the background. In the twentieth century Abkhazia was transformed into one of the best vacation spots on Earth. The relic pine forests and the lush subtropical vegetation of the coastal strip remind one of northern California, only 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 highest status Soviet-era entities such as the Ministry of Defense, the *Pravda* newspaper, and the Union of Writers built imposing vacation retreats for their personnel on Abkhazia's coast. Furthermore, Abkhazia's subtropical 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 was even more precious in relative value than California—within the immense confines of the USSR, after all, there were very few moderately humid subtropical locales.

Just as in California or Florida, the prized landscape is actually man-made and very recent. Earlier in its history, Abkhazia, like much of the Caucasus, consisted of roadless mountain slopes covered with impenetrable thorny forests and unhealthy swamps in the lowlands. The exotic palm trees and citrus orchards were planted by Russian colonial botanists in the 1900s, and the coast was at last freed from endemic malaria only in the 1950s, thanks to extensive public works and the spread of eucalyptuses. The resulting real estate value of Abkhazia brought the blessing of exceptional wealth during the 1950s–1980s (the times of late Soviet prosperity), but it also brought the curse of seemingly perpetual devastation after the collapse of Soviet order in the early 1990s.

Linguistics, Archeology, Ethno-Genetics

Linguistically and anthropologically, the native Abkhazians belong to the North Caucasian group of peoples, also comprised of the Adyghs (Adygeis, Circassians, Kabardins) and, more distantly, the Vainakhs (Chechens and Ingushes), and most Daghestanis. To the considerable pride of its native speakers, the Abkhazian language is featured in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's hardest tongue. Indeed, it boasts sixty or so consonants to just four or even one (depending on the dialect) vowels. The verdict of patriotic Georgian scholars renders Abkhazian merely *patois*, a backward dialect of the Georgian language. Today, however, comparative linguists believe 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), Ural-Altaic (Turkic) or Kartvelian (a small endemic family which consists of Georgian and its dialects).

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 Dene (the languages once spoken by California's Indians). This newest scientific discovery has not yet been appropriated by the patriotic Abkhazian 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 president Dr. Vladislav Ardzinba is

himself a professional historical linguist who 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 vituperously contest) this scholarly theory as political argument directly related to presumed historical rights. Yet all it really says is that the mountain environment was so inaccessible and poor that historical migrations and conquests bypassed the Caucasus ridge, which resulted in durably isolated languages and genetic pools.

Isolation apparently explains the fabled longevity of native Abkhazians (an inordinate number of elderly people indeed stay alive and healthy past one hundred years). During many years of multidisciplinary inquiry by Soviet and Western scholars into the Abkhazian gerontological phenomenon, researchers pursued factors as diverse as the yogurt-based diet, climate, natural background radiation, and the special respect and social roles accorded by the Abkhazian culture to male and female elders. The most robust hypothesis suggests simply an advantageous genetic mutation that became sustained in a relatively small population. (By curious coincidence, the other similar pool of highlander longevity gene is found in Karabagh.)

History

Another manifestation of durable isolation is the easy-going religious syncretism of Abkhazians. 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 claims, however, were nominal. The empires and the native Abkhazian princes possessed neither resources nor sufficient reasons to struggle for establishing credible claims over the self-governing highlander communities scattered over the poor and inaccessible periphery of the larger Mediterranean. In Abkhazia, as elsewhere in the Caucasus, the traditional social organization rested on independent village communities interwoven in extensive kinship networks. The princely families and their convoluted feudal politics—the very staple of historical monographs—in fact were pretty superfluous to this kind of social organization. By default, the majority of Abkhazians remained essentially pagan believers under the thin veneer of mixed up Christianity and Islam.

Today, as I have observed, sacred groves are still frequented for the annual sacrificial feasts, and the dead are buried after long periods of funerary rites in the backyard rather than in cemeteries. I have heard common Abkhazians ridiculing the Muslim zeal displayed by the volunteers from Chechnya and the Middle East who in 1992 rushed to defend Abkhazia's independence against the Christian Georgians. After the quiet departure of foreign volunteers, the mosques they began building remain abandoned. Except for a few Russians priests and the Russian Orthodox churches, there is little Christian presence.

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According to textbooks, Abkhazia became part of the Russian empire in 1810 when a particular branch of Abkhazian princely lineage swore vassalage to the tsar. Those native princes shed the superficial Islam of the previous pro-Ottoman orientation, reinvented their Orthodox Christian identity, and soon adopted the culture of the much larger Georgian nobility at Russia's imperial service. 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 in reality generalize the eleventh–twelfth centuries experience, when the feudal kingdom of Georgia was strong enough to pull the Abkhazian princes into its political and cultural orbit. We have no historical evidence to judge whether the medieval cultural bonds penetrated beyond the thin Abkhazian feudal elite. But the 19th century situation is sufficiently documented to make it clear that Russian and, by proxy, Georgian presence in Abkhazia was a diplomatic fiction until the final military defeat of the independent highlander communities of the Caucasus in 1864.

Demographics and Empire

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the population of Abkhazia (probably around a hundred thousand—actual numbers are hard to estimate due to the complete lack of any state authority and thus the lack of censuses prior to the 1870s) consisted solely of ethnic native Abkhazians and a few other closely related peoples (Ubykh, Sadz) that no longer exist. In 1864 the sweeping push of Russian armies towards the Black Sea provoked an apocalyptic panic among highlanders that led to mass exodus across the sea into Ottoman lands (now Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and even Kosovo.) The panic swept the whole 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. At least one half or perhaps as much as three quarters of Abkhazians abandoned their native land in successive waves following the series of crushed rebellions between 1864 and 1878. Their neighbors to the north, the Ubykhs and Abadzekhs, left entirely. Most of them would assimilate in the Middle East, remembering only that their ancestors came from the Caucasus. The languages were apparently lost (the nationalist policies of the Turkish Republic hardly helped in this regard). The last speaker of the Ubykh language, a linguistic relative of Abkhazian, died in Turkey in 1974. In a bittersweet accident, Georges Dumezile himself recorded the Ubykh language and folklore before it disappeared for good.

The anguish of exile instilled among the North Caucasian *mahajees* (Muslim refugees fleeing from the infidels) a pro-Turkish, militantly Islamic identification directed against the Russian conquerors. The current 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 Abkhazians, Circassians, and Chechens. In the meantime, the Abkhazians who remained in their homeland grew very pro-Russian, which has more than bemused the diaspora volunteers as they rushed to recover the land of their ancestors in 1992.

Invariably the diaspora nationalisms tend to presume their ethnic cradles have remained a repository of untainted national culture. But in the last century, Abkhazia underwent profound changes that made the Abkhazians an ethnic minority of 17 percent whose special status in the face of a Georgian majority of around 45–50 percent could be secured only by the counterbalancing factor of Russian state interests.

Abkhazian popular memory, therefore, downplays the effects of 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. Before 1917 the Russian administration had two objectives in Abkhazia: to create a revenue base by encouraging the introduction of cash-crop plantations (citrus fruits, tobacco, tea); and, in a related effort, to placate the restless peasantry of western Georgia with land grants in Abkhazia.

The demographic explosion in the Georgian countryside was due to the spread of substantially more productive American corn (instead of traditional millet) at some time during the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, followed by the imposition of Russian rule in the early nineteenth century, which curbed the depredations of feudal warfare and slave trade. But the Russian rule in Georgia depended critically on the loyalty of the Georgian nobility (who had absorbed the Abkhazian princes), whose numbers were multiplying even faster than the numbers of their serf peasants. When Georgian serfdom was abolished in the late 1860s, the Russian administration yielded to the native noblemen and gave the freed peasants even punier land plots than those meted out in central Russia. Land reclamation and resettlement into frontier territories like Abkhazia notwithstanding, the rapid development of a monetized economy, cash-crop plantations, and accelerating population growth by the beginning of the twentieth century significantly worsened the plight of the peasantry throughout the Caucasus. When the Russian state experienced revolutionary breakdowns in 1905 and again in 1917, social pressures erupted all over in the form of rural revolts, land seizures and banditry. In a multiethnic environment, agrarian unrest evolved into numerous ethnic confrontations involving various sub-groups of Georgians, Azeris, Armenians, Ossets, and Abkhazians.

The complexities of demography, land tenure and the revolutionary politics of the time became totally incomprehensible to Caucasian men and women who grew up in the radically different atmosphere of Soviet times. The historical memory of the Caucasian peoples was imperfectly preserved in family lore and eventually shaped by modern national intellectuals, who about the dreadful events of 1905 and 1917–1921 could only say “they were killing us” (this crude simplification, of course, was repeated with enormously emotional belief). When the Soviet state began breaking down in the late 1980s, the traumatic memories became actualized and consciously reenacted in the new and quite different historical circumstances.

It is utterly wrong to follow the local nationalists and their supporters, however numerous and vociferous, in claiming that the recent conflicts were just

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the reemergence of age-old hatreds. Interethnic relations consist of myriad daily-life interactions ranging from personal-level cooperation (friendships, intermarriages, corruption if one wishes) to occasional conflicts (careerist competition or drunken brawls) that nonetheless, under normal circumstances, find daily-life resolution—even if that (in particularly dire instances) might involve the police. The impression of history repeating itself is produced by two factors: the culturally driven rationalization of all kinds of conflict along the lines of traumatic historical memory, and the path-dependent institutionalization of ethnicity by modern national states. The Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia offered poignant examples of the (originally quite successful) institutionalization of troublesome ethnicities in the framework of federal republics. They became unmanageable and destructive when the socialist states attempted limited liberalization and market reforms in response to their declining legitimacy and the looming bankruptcy of previous industrialization efforts.

Politics

In 1918, as Russia was descending into the hell of civil war, Georgia became an independent state and hurried to impose its own administration over ethnically problematic areas, including Abkhazia. The presumably irrational ethnic violence of those times is commonly blamed on imperfections in East Europeans' character, class structures, and institutions. Overlooked is the centrality of the League of Nations, with its perfectly liberal and legalistic discourse in sponsoring nationalist warfare on the ruins of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires. The Great Powers gathered in Versailles in 1919 stipulated for the newly independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia three standard conditions, which were to be met within one year in order to receive full recognition as nation-states. The three conditions were: a) historical rights; b) cultural belonging of the populations, if necessary, decided in plebiscites; and c) effective occupation. The first clause prompted the new regimes to create those committees of national historians and ethnographers whose patriotic findings to this day supply most of nationalist ammunition. The second and especially the third condition—the demand of effective occupation, which was 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 their 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.

Everywhere—in Karabagh, Adjara, Southern Ossetia, and in Abkhazia—the arrival of nationalist armed forces exacerbated the local ethnically colored agrarian conflicts and led to outright massacres. The Abkhazian village militias (called Kiaraz) sought an alternative source of weapons from the Russian Bolsheviks, who in their turn counted on transforming the disparate rural resistances into Communist-organized rebellions against the nationalist regimes. After finally taking Georgia in 1921, the Bolsheviks united it with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Abkhazia into the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation. This

historical precedent, rooted in the constitutional experimentation of the early Soviet era, would later be stressed by Abkhazian leaders in the late 1980s to claim that they were all along equal to Georgia in status.

It is an understatement to say that the convoluted Soviet system of national federalism functioned only due to the central institution of the Communist party (supported by secret police), and based largely on common understandings and through personal networks within the party apparatus. The status of Abkhazia hinged on the personality of its hugely popular leader Nestor Lakoba, the semi-educated former honorable 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 this reason or, likelier, because Abkhazia was generally considered too backward and peripheral, Lakoba was able to postpone the collectivization of Abkhazian peasantry until his sudden death in 1936. The Abkhazian leader died several days after he had feasted with Lavrenti Beria, then the communist boss of Georgia.

With Lakoba eliminated and posthumously declared an enemy of the people, Beria launched the Georgianization of Abkhazia with his trademark organizational vigor and ruthlessness. The 1936 constitution made Abkhazia an autonomy of the Georgian SSR. Large numbers of Georgian collective farmers and specialists were transferred to Abkhazia as part of a campaign against backwardness. Meanwhile the Abkhazian language, which only a decade earlier acquired its own alphabet, was replaced with the Georgian language in official usage, and the nascent Abkhazian intelligentsia was decimated in purges. The attempted forced Georgianization of Abkhazia (and the parallel campaign in Southern Ossetia) falls into the late 1930s Stalinist trend to reduce the roster of national autonomies to a more manageable number and to eliminate along the way virtual fiefdoms like the one carved up by Lakoba in Abkhazia. But the fact that both Stalin and Beria were ethnic Georgians was not missed in either Abkhazia or in Georgia.

After 1953 the surviving Abkhazian intelligentsia (a few writers, historians, educators produced mostly in the earlier Soviet era) and the Abkhazian party cadres exploited the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria to reverse the tide. The ethnic demographics were changed irreversibly—without a Georgian and (to a lesser degree) Armenian and Russian labor force, the modern agriculture and the newly prominent resort sector of Abkhazia would have collapsed. But the Abkhazian leaders successfully urged Khrushchev to revert to the “truly Leninist nationality policies,” namely state sponsorship of Abkhazian culture and affirmative action in university admissions and administrative promotions favoring the titular nationality. Naturally, these policies provoked apprehension and resentment among Georgians who occupied various positions in Abkhazia ranging from government minister down to university instructors, collective farm managers, and the police.

Normally such tensions would be contained by the bureaucratic procedures and the constraints imposed by official Soviet discourse on nationalities. In fact,

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after 1954 the bureaucratic containment of nationalist disruptions would become the norm for years to come, forcing the Georgian majority to adapt and learn how to live with it. But Georgia was one of the least compliant and quiescent Soviet republics in every respect. Georgia's history and agrarian social structures resembled Poland. Both countries boasted vibrant civil societies centered on highly regarded artistic and professorial intelligentsia whose lineages reached back to the inordinately large and ambitious petty nobility of pre-socialist times.

From 1956 to 1989, unruly Georgia was no less Moscow's headache than was Poland. The post-Stalinist regime felt constant apprehension in the face of periodic outbursts of intelligentsia-led protests. Moscow typically responded with a mixture of coopting and repressive measures against the nationalist intelligentsia, which inadvertently created an expanding opportunity structure for further protest mobilizations. Moscow offered generous aid to the Georgian economy and cultural institutions (that never had it better than under Brezhnev) while remaining the target of every blame. The Abkhazian population benefited even more, given that in this period its number stabilized at less than one hundred thousand (it was around 17 percent of Abkhazia's total population of under one-half million). Ethnic Russians, Armenians and Greeks had each a share comparable to Abkhaz (12–17 percent), while the ethnic Georgians (mostly the Mingrelian subgroup) maintained a plurality of 40–46 percent. Each cycle of protest left in its wake newly actualized practices, ever-wider networks, and conciliatory political arrangements that ensured the recurrence of further protests. Both Georgian and Abkhazian protestors maneuvered to select the issues and rhetoric that would resonate with national feelings yet would avoid directly assaulting the core of Communist ideology, thereby leaving Moscow no alternative but to respond harshly.

As long as the Soviet state remained functioning in the low-repression mode, the cycle of protest evidently offered a valuable bargaining opportunity for Georgian and Abkhazian officials. They were conniving almost openly with dissidents and crowds. Escalating cycles of protest regarding Abkhazia's status took place every decade: in the late 1950s, the late 1960s, in 1978–1979, and in December 1988. Each campaign served to embolden protestors and wrangle substantial benefits intended to pacify mass passions. Ironically, it was at the pinnacle of Gorbachev's democratization that Moscow finally resolved to use coercion instead of its usual gratuitous pacification of the ritualized Georgian-Abkhazian clashes. In April 1989, Soviet paratroopers were sent to disperse protesting crowds permanently occupying Tbilisi's central square. The paratroopers had to be armed with trenching shovels due to the shortage of batons, and apparently received no instruction in combating angry civilians. Nineteen protestors died in the ensuing clash, most of them women. Tbilisi's shovel massacre initiated the first anticommunist revolution of 1989. In a single tragic night, the legitimacy of Georgia's Communist party was destroyed and the mercurial nationalist dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia suddenly became a likely contender for state power.

Revolution and War

Two typical stories from Abkhazia illustrate the turmoil unleashed by the events of 1989. In one, an Abkhazian farmer meets his old Georgian friend for a drink, but instead of the usual conversation about soccer and tangerine crops, the Georgian begins passionately asserting that Georgia is the most civilized ancient nation in the Caucasus, long-suffering from Russian domination. When the Abkhazian fails to match the emotions of his friend, the latter grimly proposes a toast to the death of all Abkhazians. In another instance, the graciously charismatic Djaba Ioseliani—whose colorful life 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 para-military organization the National Rescue Squad (*Mkhedrioni*). Ioseliani had the greatest success in the cluster of 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 Abkhazians a backward subset of Georgians whose ego was deliberately boosted by Moscow’s attempt to dominate Georgia. He furthermore announced the pending privatization of land and the resorts of Abkhazia under the post-socialist reforms of the independent Georgian state and hinted that membership in his para-military movement would figure significantly in the privatization of Soviet-era assets. The emboldened villagers joined en masse, receiving the *Mkhedrioni* badges, preauthorized titles to property, and some guns. Two years later these villages would be burnt to the ground by joint Abkhazian-Chechen forces led by then little-known Shamil Basayev.

The Abkhazian population of less than one hundred thousand felt beleaguered by five million Georgians and the republic’s prospective independence. Furthermore, senior Abkhazian Communist leaders became irrelevant when Gorbachev’s acts removed the top nomenklatura patrons of the Abkhazian elite from power in Moscow. In the ensuing chaos, organization of the Abkhazian countermobilization passed to the younger and less inhibited generation of national nomenklatura. They pursued two goals: preserving the Soviet-era ethnic quota system, which prevented local Georgians from scoring an automatic majority in the Abkhazian parliamentary elections; and recruiting external allies—Russian, Chechen, Armenian, and Middle Eastern—in order to counterbalance the overwhelming odds enjoyed by the Georgian majority.

The compactness of the Abkhazian population made its political mobilization relatively easy. By contrast, the emerging political scene of Georgia was plagued by extreme fragmentation reminiscent of feudal patrimonial feuds. During Soviet times, when the Communist party offered a common unifying target, the inherited culture of the Georgian petty nobility embedded in high-status networks of intelligentsia and professionals helped to maintain a vibrant civil society. But once Soviet rule collapsed, the “good families” of Georgia quarreled shamefully. Besides, their social skills and habits, cultivated in intellectual salons and at Georgian banquets, proved quite inadequate to the tasks of state-building and war-

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making. The first post-Communist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose rise to power was largely due to his pedigree (he was the son of famous national writer), was overthrown by his erstwhile allies within a year. Eduard Shevardnadze, a senior Soviet-era statesman of legendary cunning, was then called to sort out the mess. Shevardnadze eventually achieved a degree of pacification. But this could happen only after Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani, the two warlords who brought him to power, disgraced themselves in military defeat in Abkhazia.

The origins and the course of the 1992–1993 war are shrouded in mystery. In 1991, the Abkhazian leadership managed to make a power-sharing deal with Gamsakhurdia, who probably sought to avoid war on too many 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 occupy and reward their troops with plundering the richest part of Georgian territory. Using the numerous and admittedly irresponsible proclamations of Abkhazia's parliament as pretext, the Georgian warlords launched their blitzkrieg in August 1992. Their campaign almost immediately got bogged down—either because of the threat of Russian troops still stationed in Abkhazia or, as many witnesses suggest, because the Georgian invaders began looting. Likely it was the combination of both constraints. The Abkhazian side acquired breathing space to organize their defenses.

There can be no doubt that the Abkhazians were aided by the Russian military. Despite the romantic stories of Chechen and Kabardin volunteers valiantly crossing the mountains on foot to help their Abkhazian brethren, most North Caucasus and Cossack volunteers were openly recruited on Russian territory, transported to the Abkhazian border by bus or helicopter, and trained and armed by Russian officers. The Chechen detachment of Shamil Basayev received its training on Khrushchev's former dacha in Pitsunda, which still belongs to the Russian presidential administration. The motives and the institutional movers of Russian covert aid are less clear. Journalists suggested reasons ranging from sophisticated geostrategic calculations to purported revenge against Shevardnadze, whom the Russian generals accused of selling East Germany to NATO.

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. The war in Abkhazia coincided with President Yeltsin's war on his parliament, where, incidentally, Abkhazian leaders had many friends among the anti-Yeltsin nationalists. Furthermore, it is usually disregarded that in the summer of 1992, Kabardino-Balkaria experienced a nearly successful nationalist revolution modeled on the earlier Chechen example; North Ossetia was on the brink of war with Ingushetia; the Adygeis on the Black sea coast rallied for the restoration of their national enclave, which was abolished in the mid-1950s; and the project of a pan-Caucasian Mountain Republic did not seem too hot-headed. Against this backdrop we must either

presume that Moscow was guided by a secret genius enforcing a devilishly complicated plan, or, a more parsimonious hypothesis, that the events followed a chaotic trajectory consisting of myriad contradictory acts and motivations that in the end benefited Moscow, which remained the most powerful player on the field.

The Abkhazian war of 1992–1993 consisted of sporadic and inconclusive battles, protracted periods of stalemate, and peace agreements broken every time either side (or even individual commanders) 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 and Abkhazian civilians committed paranoid acts of house burning and lynchings that were directed against suspected spies or traitors, or committed simply for the sake of symbolic revenge when soldiers were brought home for burial. It must be acknowledged that after several generations of living side-by-side, the Abkhazians and the Georgians share a common culture, common territory, and common networks created through intermarriage and agricultural or business partnerships. For many locals, it was normal to speak at least two of the commonly known languages in the area (Abkhazian, Georgian, and Russian). Therefore the war-induced separation was traumatic and produced the sociopsychological effects documented in anthropological literature on ritual impurity and witch-hunts.

The random atrocities became a central part of organized warfare towards the end of war, in September-October 1993, when joint Abkhazian and external volunteer forces tricked Georgian defenses and rapidly captured the capital of Suhum (pronounced Suhumi in Georgian) and the rest of Abkhazia. Before the war only 7 percent of Suhum's population was ethnic Abkhazian, while the richest agricultural district of Gali in southern Abkhazia was entirely Georgian. Evidently, Abkhazian war leaders calculated that given their limited manpower it would be impossible to control predominantly Georgian-populated areas, hence better there be no population at all. Ethnic cleansing has its own perverse logic. The atrocities must be despicable enough to produce a wave of panic and drive large populations to flee from a small band of fighters who would otherwise be unable to prevent resistance in their rear—a simple maximization of return on effort.

Field Observations

For seven years now Abkhazia has been at “border war” against the Georgian guerrillas in the south and blockaded by Russia in the north. The stated reasons for the Russian blockade are a response to the request of the Georgian government and the likelihood that Abkhazian territory is being used by Chechen rebels. Other reasons for Russia's blockade of its unacknowledged client state remain a matter of speculation. War and the blockade have reduced the economy of Abkhazia to subsistence agriculture and semi-smuggling, conducted mostly by women across the Russian border. Schools and hospitals function insofar as the remaining personnel come to work, usually by personal agreement with their pupils or patients. Wages and pensions are paid in Russian rubles once in a while,

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but their amounts are downright ridiculous—between seven and one dollar per month. Police are present at roadblocks, but justice seems to have reverted to traditional practices of vendetta. The incidence of crime, however, is relatively low, likely because the remaining population consists of small rural communities of Abkhazians and local Armenians. Alcoholism has grown to epidemic proportions among males. Poverty and cases of malnourishment, particularly among children and the elderly, are visible despite the abundance of subtropical fruits and housing now occupied by refugees and squatters. The youth are especially depressed and dream of escaping to Russia or to places even farther away, but most lack the requisite money, skills, and professional education. In the beginning of the post-war depression and the Russian blockade, Abkhazian President Vladislav Ardzinba made upbeat calls in his regular TV appearances to survive on the traditional corn meal and red pepper; he also claimed that living without electricity at night was a good chance to boost the number of Abkhazian children. But more recently Ardzinba has reduced his public appearances and apparently suffered a serious loss in popularity as more of his relatives and friends took control over the remaining profit sources.

The possible return of Georgian refugees elicits very contradictory reactions. It is encouraging that many Abkhazians think this would happen inevitably and should be welcomed as a possible return to normalcy. Yet many among those who participated in the war are reluctant to face their former enemies and victims. There exist further divisions within veterans' groups between hard-line warriors and those who fight only in a time of danger, as well as between those who fought and those who looted. Similar divisions can be likely found among Georgian refugees who fled in 1993. Thus the conflict should not be presented in bipolar terms, as a matter of Abkhazians versus Georgians. There is room for subtler maneuvering at the level of popular perceptions.

Policy Recommendations

History

The long history of interethnic conflict in Abkhazia does *not* mean the current struggle is fueled by the mysterious vitality of ancient hatreds. As in other so-called ethnic conflicts, it is rather a path-dependent cumulation of feudal and ecclesiastic politics, the ways in which early modern empires consolidated their rule over multiethnic realms, the agrarian revolts induced by the breakdown of empires, and the thoughtless acts of the League of Nations. Most recently it is the longer-term conflictual trends resulting from the initial success of communist nationality policies. In a nutshell, we must revamp history courses and actively intervene in reframing popular perceptions. History is too important a political factor to be left to local nationalist intellectuals.

State-Building

The modern cycles of violence in the Caucasus and the Balkans are clearly pegged to the cycles of modern state creation and breakdown. Therefore it is vital

to create new states in the area. But new states must not be national and nationalizing—quite contrary to what has been the dominant trend and the ideology of the recent decade. Inventing particular patterns of non-national state-building is the major challenge. Yet it is clear this will not happen without integrating the troublesome zones of the Balkans and the Caucasus into much larger entities, possibly the EU or a renewed market-based Russian sphere of influence. In its own turn, the shape and the outlook of Russia's newest empire will depend on the character of Russia's integration into the world system.

Economy

The noisy boom occurring in Sochi, across the Russian border from desolate Abkhazia, suggests a likely take-over by new Russian capital. Once the blockade is lifted and the scene is sufficiently stabilized, we may see latter-day Russian carpetbaggers rushing to Abkhazia. In itself this is not damaging, but this process cannot be left to run its own course, for the consequences would likely be disruptive of any tenuous peace and renewed Abkhazian-Georgian coexistence.

Demography

The immediate conclusion is stark. The return of refugees cannot be the immediate goal, and from the beginning it has been a wrong policy priority. The real priority is the establishment of lawful authority capable of enforcing law and order. Since very little trust exists between the Abkhazian and the Georgian population at the moment, and the prospect of an effective state is remote, refugees will continue to suffer in exile. Their adaptation to long-term exile is at least a more humane approach.

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