

# The Forgotten Abkhazia: Anatomy of Post-Socialist Ethnic War

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Local wars in the Caucasus have always tended to follow precedents--whether in the 19th century, in 1917-21, or in the period of 1989-94. It remains uncertain whether the NATO operation in Kosovo or the second Chechen war within a decade will induce new wars in Karabakh, Abkhazia and elsewhere, but it is clear that the region's many conflicts have not ended in any durable solution.

The conventional explanation for such conflicts stresses the combination of local ancient hatreds and Moscow's secret meddling. I argue that this explanation is both incorrect and an impediment to finding a durable, peaceful solution. After all (it is argued), there is nothing to be done if the hatreds are so ancient, and Russia, as any state faced with similar problems, can surely be expected to continue "meddling" in its Caucasian underbelly. To reframe these inherently pessimistic assumptions, let us revisit the background and the typical arguments or presumed "facts" one hears from the opponents in the Abkhazia conflict. This is by no means a pedantic exercise. Abkhazia's troubles are structurally similar to other smoldering separatist conflicts throughout the Caucasus and the Balkans. By getting the record straight with Abkhazia, we may gain a better understanding of Karabakh and Kosovo, as well.

## **Geography**

Abkhazia consists of about 250 kilometers of gorgeous winding beaches and densely green valleys climbing to the snowy peaks of the Caucasus towering in the background. In the 20th century, Abkhazia was transformed into one of the best vacation spots on earth. The resorts and the agricultural hinterland of Abkhazia were exceptionally precious, for within the immense confines of the USSR, after all, there were very few moderately humid sub-tropical locales.

The real estate value of Abkhazia brought the blessing of exceptional wealth during the 1950s-80s, the times of late Soviet prosperity, but it also caused the curse of seemingly perpetual devastation after the collapse of Soviet order in the early 1990s.

## **Linguistics, Archeology, and 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. 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.

## **History and Culture**

A manifestation of durable isolation is the easy-going religious syncretism of Abkhazians. The majority of Abkhazians remained essentially pagan believers under the thin veneer of mixed Christianity and Islam. Today, as I have observed myself, 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 the foreign volunteers, the mosques they built remain abandoned.

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. But the 19th century situation is sufficiently documented to make it clear that the Russian in Abkhazia was a squarely diplomatic fiction until the final military defeat of the independent highlander communities of the Caucasus in 1864.

## **Demographics**

In 1864 the sweeping push of Russian armies towards the Black Sea provoked among highlanders an apocalyptic panic that led to a mass exodus across the sea into Ottoman lands (now Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and even Kosovo.) As much as one half to perhaps three quarters of Abkhazians abandoned their native land. The bitterness 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 more than bemused the diaspora volunteers as they rushed in 1992 to recover the land of their ancestors. 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 Abkhazians an ethnic minority of 17% whose special status in the face of a Georgian majority of around 45-50% could be secured only by the counterbalancing factor of Russian state interests. Abkhazian popular memory, therefore, downplays the effects of Russian conquest.

### **What Really Is in Popular Memory of Past Conflicts?**

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, and tea) and in a related effort, placate the restless peasantry of western Georgia with land grants in Abkhazia. Despite the land reclamation and resettlement into frontier territories like Abkhazia, the rapid development of a monetized economy, cash-crop plantations and accelerating population growth by the beginning of the 20th century significantly worsened the plight of peasantry throughout the Caucasus. When in 1905 and again in 1917 the Russian state experienced revolutionary breakdowns, the social pressures erupted all over in the form of rural revolts, land seizures, and banditry. In a multiethnic environment the 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 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 only say about the dreadful events of 1905 and 1917-1921 "they were killing us," but, of course, this crude simplification 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 under new and quite different historical circumstances.

It is utterly wrong to follow the local nationalists, however numerous and vociferous, in claiming that the recent conflicts were just the reemergence of age-old hatreds. Under normal circumstances the micro-conflicts (of which the macro-conflicts consist) would find resolution in daily life--even if that, in particularly dire instances, might involve the police. The impression of history repeating itself is produced by two factors:

- 1) the culturally-driven rationalization of all kinds of conflict along the lines of traumatic historical memory; and
- 2) the path-dependent institutionalization of ethnicity by modern national states.

The Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia offered poignant examples of the institutionalization (originally quite successful) of troublesome ethnicities in the framework of federal republics. This framework 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**

The presumably irrational ethnic violence is commonly blamed on imperfections in character, class structures, and institutions of Eastern Europeans. Overlooked is the centrality of the League of Nations with its perfectly liberal and legalistic discourse in sponsoring the nationalist warfare on the ruins of the Hapsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires. In 1919 the Great Powers set three standard conditions to be met within one year by the newly created nation-states. The three conditions were: 1) historical rights; 2) cultural belonging of the populations, if necessary, decided in plebiscites; and 3) effective occupation. The first clause prompted the new regimes to create the committees of national historians and ethnographers whose patriotic findings supply the most nationalist ammunition to this day. The second and especially the third condition, the demand of effective occupation, 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 Karabakh, 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 militias sought an alternative source of weapons via the Russian Bolsheviks. Abkhazia became autonomous within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic as its reward.

In 1936 Lavrenti Beria, then Party First Secretary of Georgia, launched the "Georgianization" of Abkhazia with his trademark organizing vigor and ruthlessness. 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. This falls into the late 1930s Stalinist trend to reduce the roster of national autonomies to a more manageable number and eliminate along the way virtual fiefdoms like Abkhazia. But the fact that both Stalin and Beria were ethnic Georgians was missed in neither Abkhazia nor in Georgia.

After 1953 the surviving Abkhazian intelligentsia and party cadres exploited the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria to reverse the tide. The ethnic demographics were changed irreversibly but the Abkhazian leaders successfully urged Khrushchev to resume state sponsorship of Abkhazian culture and affirmative action in university admissions and administrative promotions favoring the titular nationality. Unsurprisingly enough, this provoked resentment among the local Georgians.

Normally such tensions would be contained by the bureaucratic procedures and the constraints imposed by official Soviet discourse on nationalities. But Georgia boasted a vibrant civil society centered around a 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, the unruly Georgia was no less Moscow's headache than Poland. Each cycle of protest left in its wake newly actualized practices, and ever-wider networks and conciliatory political arrangements which ensured the recurrence of further protests. 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. The escalating cycles of protest regarding Abkhazia's status took place every decade: in the late 1950s, the late 1960s, in 1978-79, and in December 1988.

Ironically, it was at the pinnacle of Gorbachev's democratization that Moscow finally resolved to use coercion instead of the usual gratuitous pacification of Georgian-Abkhazian ritualized clashes. In April 1989 nineteen protestors died in Tbilisi, most of them women. Tbilisi's shovel massacre initiated the first anti-Communist revolution of 1989. Over one single tragic night the legitimacy of Georgia's Communist party was destroyed and the mercurial nationalist dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia suddenly became the likely contender for state power.

### **Revolution and War**

The Abkhazian population of less than one hundred thousand felt beleaguered by the five million Georgians and the republic's prospective independence. In the disarray, the organizing of Abkhazian countermobilization passed to the younger and less inhibited generation of national nomenklatura. They pursued two goals: 1) to preserve the Soviet-era ethnic quota system, which prevented the local Georgians from scoring an automatic majority in the Abkhazian parliamentary elections; and 2) to recruit external allies among Russians and Chechens simultaneously.

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. In January 1992, after Gamsakhurdia was toppled by his erstwhile allies (apparently helped by Yeltsin), Eduard Shevardnadze was called to sort out the Georgian mess. Shevardnadze eventually achieved a degree of pacification, but not before Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani, the two picturesque warlords who brought him to power, disgraced themselves with military defeat in Abkhazia.

The origins and the course of the 1992-93 war are shrouded in dark mysteries. But there can be no doubt that the Abkhazians were aided by the Russian military. The Chechen detachment of Shamil Basayev received its training on 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 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 actor capable of long-term calculations under conditions of radical uncertainty, along with the seamless execution of plans. Either the acts of Moscow were guided by a secret genius enforcing a devilishly complicated plan, or the events followed a chaotic trajectory consisting of myriad contradictory acts and motivations that in the end benefited Moscow.

In the end, the Abkhazians, just like the Karabakh Armenians, scored victory by benefiting from the combination of stronger popular mobilization (due to acute feelings of national danger), disarray in the enemy camp, and covert Russian aid. Abkhazian war leaders exploited the chaos in Moscow in late September to early October 1993 (the days when Yeltsin was fighting the Supreme Soviet). Realizing that it would be impossible to control predominantly Georgian-population areas, they apparently resolved there should be no population at all. Ethnic cleansing has its own perverse logic--a simple maximization of return on effort.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- *History.* The long history of inter-ethnic conflict in Abkhazia does not mean it is fueled by the mysterious vitality of ancient hatreds. As in other so-called "ethnic" conflicts it is rather a specific cumulation of feudal and ecclesiastic politics--the ways in which early modern empires consolidated their rule over multi-ethnic realms, the agrarian revolts induced by the breakdown of empires, and the ill-considered decisions of the League of Nations. At fault most recently are the longer-term conflictual trends that resulted from the initial success of communist nationality policies. In a nutshell, we must revamp historical education and actively intervene in reframing popular perception. 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 cycles of state creation and breakdown. It is therefore vital to create new states in the area. But new states must not be national and nationalizing--in stark contrast to what has been the dominant trend and ideology of recent decades. Inventing the particular patterns of non-national state-building is the main 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 European Union or a renewed, market-based Russian sphere. In turn, the shape and the outlook of the newest Russian 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 the likely takeover by new Russian capital. Once the Russian blockade of Abkhazia is lifted and the scene is sufficiently stabilized, we may see latter day Russian carpetbaggers rushing to the region. In itself this is not evil, 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.
- *Demographics.* The immediate conclusion is stark: the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia cannot be an immediate goal, and from the beginning was 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 Abkhazians and Georgians and the prospects for an effective state are remote, refugees will continue to suffer in exile. Long-term adaptation to exile may be a more humane approach.