Abkhazia and Georgia: Time for a Reassessment

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Much has been written since the summer of 2008 about Russian–Georgian relations and the rights and wrongs of the August fighting that erupted in and around both South Ossetia and, to a lesser extent, Abkhazia. Most commentators, such as foreign correspondents, media opinion-formers, NATO spokesmen, and politicians forgot, or chose to ignore, the issues underlying the conflicts in both of these long-suffering Transcaucasian regions, preferring to take their cues from Georgia's well-oiled, or at least well-financed, spinning machine. Thus, the line of argument held by most commentators has been that President Dmitry Medvedev and Premier Vladimir Putin have embarked on a mission to revive the Kremlin's imperial ambitions that had been dormant since the 1991 collapse of the USSR, along the former Soviet periphery, beginning with punishment of Georgia for the avowedly pro-Western stance of its president Mikheil Saak'ashvili, since his overthrow of the Eduard Shevardnadze regime in November 2003.

Ultimately, it has been the larger matter of East-West relations that have mostly been debated, whilst the voices of those trying to argue their respective cases against Tbilisi for some two (if not nine) decades have been drowned out. This article seeks to redress the balance, with special reference to the Abkhazian cause.[1]

History

During its roughly seventy years of existence, the Soviet Union's internal frontiers and administrative structures have interested very few in the outside world. Georgia might have been better known for a time than most of the far-flung republics, thanks to its

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scion Joseph Stalin, but rare indeed were the denizens of Western foreign ministries not thrown into mild panic with Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 surprise appointment of Shevardnadze—Georgia's Party Boss since 1972—as Soviet Foreign Minister, given the obscurity of the man and his nation. Georgia emerged from the ruins of the USSR seeking recognition within its Soviet borders, a goal attained in 1992. However, the fact that the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic possessed a set of defined frontiers in 1991 does not mean that, at any given moment in history, the state, however named, necessarily encompassed all the said territory or that those frontiers were justified within the Soviet context. This, then, is the first topic for examination.

At its zenith under the legendary Queen Tamar (1184–1213), the medieval kingdom of Georgia extended even beyond its Soviet boundaries to include substantial tracts lying today in eastern Turkey, where Georgians and most Laz still live, speaking their ancestral tongues. The first king of this unified state, Bagrat' III, in 978 inherited from his Abkhazian mother, Gurandukht', the Kingdom of Abkhazia, which included both Abkhazia proper and most of today's west Georgian provinces, which Abkhazian prince Leon II had added to his domains in the late 8th century. By the time of his death in 1014, Bagrat' had inherited all remaining Georgian-speaking regions, and, as his 36-year reign ended, the Georgian chronicler ascribed to him the title *apxazta da kartvelta mepe*: "Sovereign of the Abkhazians and the Georgians."[2] However, this unified polity was bound to fragment after the depredations of the Mongols, who first appeared in the Caucasus during the reign of Tamar's daughter, Rusudan, in the 1240s. In its territory, different kingdoms and princedoms arose, and Abkhazia—more or less as we understand the geographical reference of this term today—was one such independent princedom under the Chachba family. No state entity formally called "Georgia" re-emerged until the early twentieth century.

Passing through the Caucasus in 1404, the cleric Johannes de Galonifontibus has left a brilliantly succinct description of the sequence of countries he visited. His text translates: "Beyond these [Circassians] is Abkhazia, a small hilly country...They have their own language...To the east of them, in the direction of Georgia, lies the country called Mingrelia...They have their own language...Georgia is to the east of this country. Georgia is not an integral whole...They have their own language."[3] One can imagine a fluid south-eastern border between Abkhazia and neighboring Mingrelia (under the Dadiani princes) as political fortunes waxed and waned, but this frontier was set along the River Ingur in the 1680s—and there it has remained ever since. When Ottoman sea-power came to dominate the Black Sea, Turkish influence spread along the eastern seaboard, and in its wake Islam rivaled Christianity amongst the North West Caucasian speakers, though neither religion ever completely expunged pagan beliefs.

As Tsarist Russia pushed south in the late eighteenth century following the 1783

Treaty of Georgievsk between Catherine the Great and Erek'le II, king of the central and eastern Georgian kingdoms of Kartli and K'akheti, resistance grew across virtually the whole North Caucasus. During the nineteen century Caucasian War, the Abkhazians were the only people resident south of the mountains to join it.[4] Abkhazia came under Russian "protection" in 1810 but continued to administer its own affairs until 1864. This was the year when the Caucasian War ended with the surrender of the North-West Caucasian alliance at Krasnaja Poljana, inland from Sochi. Following their defeat, all the Ubykhs and most Circassians and Abkhazians chose to abandon their ancestral lands to resettle in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, most Abkhazians and Circassians today live in the Near East, predominantly in Turkey. A further outflow took place after the 1877–1878 Russo-Turkish War. It was after these migrations, known as *maxadzhirstvo*, "Great Exile," that non-Abkhazians first started to populate the denuded areas, starting with a movement of Svans from Svanetia into the Upper K'odor Valley, supposedly to take care of the Abkhazians' wells until their return. In a series of articles published in *Tiflisskij Vestnik* (1877), the renowned Georgian educationalist Iak'ob Gogebashvili argued that the best "colonizers" (*k'olonizat'orebi*) for Abkhazia would be the Mingrelians. These articles were published as a single, 30-page contribution entitled "Who should be settled in Abkhazia?" (*vin unda iknes dasaxlebuli apxazetshi?*) in Volume 1 of Gogebashvili's collected works in 1952, at which point in time Abkhazia was still subject to the repression imposed since 1937 by a Georgian, Stalin, and a Mingrelian, Lavrent'i Beria, and so the editors felt it necessary to append a footnote to suggest to readers that Gogebashvili was not using the term "colonizers" in its modern sense![5]

There is a fascinating linguistic clue as to the status of Mingrelians in Abkhazia shortly before the migrations, for in his short list of comparative vocabulary for Abkhaz (styled "Azra", after its Ubykh designation *azgha*), Ubykh (misnamed "Abaza"), and Circassian Bell cites the Abkhazian ethnonym *agırwa* "Mingrelian"[6] but assigns it the meaning "slave." Conversely, as an indication of the respect historically shown amongst Mingrelians to the Abkhazians, we find in Givi Eliava's 1997 Mingrelian-Georgian dictionary[7] the entry *apxaza*, which is glossed "Abkhazian; metaphorically = elegant."

With the departure of at least 120,000 Abkhazians, mostly during the *maxadzhirstvo*, and the beginning of an inflow of non-Abkhazians, Abkhazian territory was subjected to different administrative divisions and arrangements up to the time of the Russian Revolution (1917). One can legitimately date the start of Abkhazia's grievances against Georgia to the period of turmoil that followed, lasting until Soviet power was established across Transcaucasia in 1921. With various groups, such as Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and White Russians under General A.I. Denikin, jockeying for supremacy at a time when the First World War was still in progress and both Turkish and German troops were active in the region, Abkhazia was first allied with the North Caucasian

Mountain Peoples' Confederation. Georgia declared independence on 26 May 1918 and on 11 June signed a treaty with Abkhazia. Nevertheless, by a mixture of political manipulation and force of arms under General G.I. Mazniev (Mazniashvili)[8], Georgia thereafter brought Abkhazia within its orbit. The Menshevik constitution of 1921 mentioned Abkhazia as an autonomous region within Georgia without specifying the nature of any state-legal relations between autonomies and the center; however, before promulgation, the government collapsed as the Red Army took control.

The Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed on 31 March 1921 and recognized by Georgia's Revolutionary Committee on 21 May. On 16 December, a treaty of alliance was signed between Abkhazia and Georgia. On 13 December 1922, the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), in treaty-alliance with the Georgian SSR, entered the Transcaucasian Federation. Once Stalin had secured his position in the Kremlin, he reduced Abkhazia's status to that of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within his native Georgia in February 1931—the status it maintained until the USSR's collapse.

After the poisoning of Abkhazia's leader Nest'or Lak'oba in 1936 by Abkhazian-born Beria in Tbilisi, Abkhazia's intelligentsia were targeted in The Terror. Furthermore, additional anti-Abkhazian measures were instituted by Beria in 1937; these continued under the direction of his successor in Tbilisi, the Svan K'andid Chark'viani, when Beria was elevated to become Stalin's chief of the secret police in 1938. The Abkhazian script, like that of South Ossetia, was shifted to a Georgian base. Large numbers of settlers, mainly Mingrelians, were transplanted into Abkhazia, effectively accomplishing Gogebashvili's 1877 recommendation to help alter the demographic balance in favor of the Georgians, for from about 1930 Mingrelians, along with Svans and Laz, became officially categorized as "Georgians."[9] Abkhazian language schools were closed between 1945 and1946 and replaced by Georgian language schools. An expert on Georgian literature, P'avle Ingoroq'va (1893–1990), fabricated the absurd theory that "today's" Abkhazians migrated to Abkhazia from the North Caucasus only in the 17th century, replacing and taking the name of history's "true" Abkhazians, who were a Georgian tribe—ergo, Abkhazia is Georgian territory; in the late 1940s, broadcasting and publishing in Abkhaz essentially ceased, and the Abkhazians just escaped transportation to Central Asia, a fate which actually befell Abkhazia's Greek community—it was felt that, given the other measures implemented, the Abkhazians would be Mingrelianized/Georgianized within generations.[10]

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Though the anti-Abkhazian policies were put into reverse after the deaths of Stalin

and Beria in 1953, the Abkhazians continued periodically to air their objections to domination by Tbilisi. After wide-scale action in 1978, including a letter to the Kremlin from 130 intellectuals—who subsequently lost their jobs—demanding the transfer of Abkhazia from Georgia to the Russian Federation, Moscow was so worried that Shevardnadze was ordered to visit Abkhazia's capital Aq^{w}'a, conventionally known as Sukhum, to calm tempers. Abkhazia remained within Georgia, but one positive result was that Aq^{w}'a replaced the previously designated city of Batumi as home to Georgia's second-only university with Abkhazian, Russian and Georgian sectors. In light of this history, it was understandable that ten years later, under Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy, the Abkhazians would once more voice their long-held grievances, which they did in the "Abkhazian Letter" sent to Moscow in June 1988. It is unclear when knowledge of this document filtered through to Tbilisi. But, before it could, Georgians had already from late 1988 succumbed with relish to the destructive nationalist calls of such anti-communist leaders as the late Merab K'ost'ava, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the late Gia Ch'ant'uria; much of their and others' rhetoric was directed not only externally towards Russia but internally towards the republic's minorities, particular venom being reserved for the Abkhazians as well as South Ossetians, with disturbing attempts to revive Ingoroq'va's hypothesis and rehabilitate its author, who lived out the last decades of his long life in deserved academic purdah.[11]

Such rallying cries as "Georgia for the Georgians!" signaled the dangers the minorities would face in an independent Georgia; in 1989, "Georgians," inflated by Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz numbers, represented only 70.1 percent of Georgia's population, whilst the Abkhazians had been reduced to a 17.8 percent minority in their homeland.[12] In defense of their ethno-regional interests against the exclusivist-chauvinist threats emanating from Tbilisi, the Abkhazians responded by establishing a national forum Aydgylara "Unity," which was paralleled by South Ossetia's Adæmon Nykhas. Aydgylara's policies threatened none of Abkhazia's non-Abkhazian denizens. The consequence of the attempt, promoted by the nationalist oppositionists, unconstitutionally to open a branch of Tbilisi State University in Aq^{w}'a to satisfy "Georgian" higher educational requirements were fatal clashes in Abkhazia over the weekend of 15-16 July 1989. Thus was the foundation laid for a series of events that would lead to full-scale war three years later.

Politics

Mingrelian Zviad Gamsakhurdia became Georgia's first post-communist president in October 1990. On 17 March 1991, Abkhazia, unlike Georgia proper, participated in Gorbachev's referendum on preserving the USSR, and an absolute majority of the

electorate, including non-Abkhazian voters, voted in favor. Continuing to work within the only constitutional framework then available, the Abkhazians, under Vladislav Ardzinba's leadership, hoped to achieve a bicameral system of government in negotiations with Gamsakhurdia. However, in 1991, Tbilisi imposed a single-chamber format, which quickly led to a stalemate and a Kartvelian boycott.

The USSR disintegrated in December. Having revealed his inadequacies as a leader and failed to achieve recognition for Georgia, Gamsakhurdia was ousted at the end of January 1992, sparking a civil war, mainly taking place in Gamsakhurdia's power base of Mingrelia. Realizing that change was necessary for Georgia to win acceptance into the international community, the putchists invited Shevardnadze to abandon his Moscow retirement and lead them. For Georgia, this was a brilliant move, as within days of Shevardnadze's return in March the EU (following the lead of the United Kingdom) and the United States not only recognized but established diplomatic relations with Georgia. However, it was ultimately to have traumatic consequences for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Upon the breakup of the USSR, the international community, whose experts had lamentably failed to predict this momentous event, quickly determined that the only new states to be recognized were the USSR's union-republics, along with the constituent parts of Yugoslavia. This ignored all potential problems resulting from Stalin's—and, in the case of the Crimea, Krushchev's—tinkering with borders and the hierarchy of administrative units therein, and it effectively set in stone those very Stalinist frontiers, however illegitimate they might be, since, after recognition, a state's territorial integrity became the only principle to be championed by the international community. One legal point overlooked here was that, based on the result of the 17 March 1991 referendum, Tbilisi had no right to include Abkhazia in any drive for independence. Tbilisi unilaterally annulled the last Soviet (Brezhnevite) constitution of 1978 in favor of reinstituting the aforementioned Menshevik Constitution of 1921 (lacking stipulation of the nature of relations with Abkhazia). As a result, the Abkhazians—in order to provide themselves with a clearly defined legal framework until a new constitution could be promulgated—on 23 July 1992 reinstated Abkhazia's 1925 Constitution, according to which Abkhazia had equal status with Georgia, with the two entities being allied by treaty. All of this counted for naught, since the international community adamantly refused to countenance lower-level recognition of territorial units based on any right to self-determination.

In a sense, then, it was only a matter of time before Georgia's Soviet borders gained the stamp of international approval. However, with the two-year-old war in South Ossetia that Gamsakhurdia had instigated in 1990 still in progress, fierce resistance still raging in Mingrelia against Georgia's unelected State Council, and tensions

rising daily in Abkhazia, recognition of Georgia followed swiftly by the gifting to it of membership of the IMF, World Bank, and the UN. This was both premature and irresponsible, especially with the elections scheduled for 11 October. Why not wait until Shevardnadze legitimized his position, promising these boons on the condition that the civil war be ended—a ceasefire had been achieved in South Ossetia in June—and that the Abkhazian question be resolved peacefully? The only explanation can have been the Shevardnadze factor, with diplomats possessing little or no knowledge of Georgia's internal complexities undoubtedly advising their political masters to do Georgia's new leader a favor for his perceived role in bringing down the Berlin Wall; thus, the advice was taken, but with little thought for the consequences. Within weeks of Georgia's admission to the UN, Shevardnadze sent his troops into Abkhazia on 14 August 1992.

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Since Abkhazia and Georgia had been treaty-allies throughout the 1920s, Ardzinba took the logical step after the reintroduction of Abkhazia's 1925 constitution of offering Tbilisi a parallel relationship, namely federal ties between the two entities. Had Georgian politicians pursued a sensible course in the final years of the Soviet state and considered a radical federalization of the republic, the obvious solution for a multi-ethnic land with minorities living compactly in border areas, instead of stoking nationalism, it is possible or even likely that the country could have gained independence with all the minorities in support, swiftly attaining the nirvana of peace and prosperity that everyone desired, thereby avoiding thousands of deaths, countless properties destroyed, creation of countless refugees, and years of economic hardship. Unfortunately, the likes of Gamsakhurdia were blind to this opportunity, and in the summer of 1992, Gamsakhurdia's longtime *bête-noire*, Shevardnadze, failed to grasp it as well. The excuse given for the dispatch of Georgian militias to Abkhazia was, first, to protect the single-track railway that linked Russia to Georgia and Armenia, and second, to free two Georgian ministers who had been taken hostage. It is true that trains were subject to frequent robberies; however, these incidents all occurred in Mingrelia, where the hostages were also detained. The only convincing explanation for the assault on Abkhazia could have been this: Shevardnadze gambled that the Zviadists battling his forces in Mingrelia would rally to the national cause in the face of a "common" foe, abandoning their opposition to the State Council that he headed. His gamble failed spectacularly.

The Shevardnadze factor surfaced again during the autumn elections, when he claimed a popular mandate as State Council Chairman. One of the U.S. observers, Gregory Minjack, who was assigned to Gori and environs—extending into South Ossetia—said, "Of course, that election was whitewashed even with ample evidence of elec-

toral curiosities which would never be tolerated in other emerging democracies."[13]

Despite facing two clearly articulated threats of genocide[14] and actually losing 4 percent of their numbers during the 14-month war, the Abkhazians and their allies from the diaspora and the North Caucasus expelled Georgia's assortment of fighters, ending the war on 30 September 1993. Abkhazians advanced across the Ingur-border up to the Mingrelian capital, Zugdidi. However, instead of holding the region as a bargaining chip, they returned home, telling the Zviadists under Loti Kobalia, who, like their fellow Mingrelians in Abkhazia's Gal District, had not supported Shevardnadze's Abkhazian escapade, that they had no irredentist claims against Georgia and were uninterested in the fate of the fleeing government-forces. At this time, the Abkhazians were well positioned to end the Shevardnadze factor once and for all, as they had the Georgian leader surrounded in his Abkhazian bunker. However, Ardzinba took Yeltsin's call and agreed to let Shevardnadze leave unharmed—his personal jet still stands at Dranda airport. Had Ardzinba behaved like Yeltsin at the start of the war and declined to pick up the receiver,[15] Shevardnadze's and Georgia's destiny would have been quite different. However, Shevardnadze's immediate problem was how to stop the advance eastwards out of Mingrelia of the Zviadists, who were pursuing the fleeing troops, capturing village after village. Georgia applied for membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the resulting "humanitarian" assistance from Russia saw an end to the rebellion. Strangely, no westerners raised a squeak of protest about Russia's presence on Georgia's soil, in contrast to the howls that greeted Russia's response to Georgian aggression in South Ossetia 15 years later. Again, the Shevardnadze factor was at work.

Peace Accords between "the sides," recognizing Abkhazia as equal in status to Georgia, were signed in the spring of 1994 in Moscow, and a force of essentially Russian CIS peacekeepers was posted to the demilitarized zone along the Ingur. No one objected to such responsibility being devolved to the Russians, just as there had been no outcry at Russians working alongside Ossetians and Georgians in the tripartite peacekeeping force appointed in the June 1992 Dagomys Agreement that ended the South Ossetian war. Thus, Abkhazia's conflict joined that of South Ossetia in the political "freezer"—until 26 August 2008.

How were these 15 years characterized? The Georgians have consistently asserted that first, Abkhazia is an inseparable Georgian territory, and second, by granting special status to Abkhazia, the early Soviets were setting time bombs to frustrate any eventual Georgian striving for independence. The latter argument conveniently ignores the fact that it was Stalin who directed Soviet nationalities policy in the 1920s and that he too demoted Abkhazia's status in 1931. The Georgians have additionally asserted that third, the 1992–1993 War was not won by the Abkhazians but by the Russians.[16] In the

early post-war years, the West paid scant attention, but the West's refusal to recognize Georgia's, specifically Shevardnadze's, responsibility for the war meant that the guilty escaped even the tame punishment of being required to acknowledge Abkhazians' right to self-determination, let alone having to pay reparations. On the contrary, support for Georgia's territorial integrity carried the implicit demand that Abkhazians, who had strangely become transformed from victims into villains, ignore their military victory and meekly accept a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, as though nothing had happened. Abkhazia became ever more isolated, as a short-lived boat-link with Trebizond was suspended, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) sanctions were imposed, the Psou-border with Russia was closed to non-carriers of Soviet/Russian passports, and acts of terrorism were perpetrated especially in the Gal Region by such Georgian government-sponsored terrorist groups as the White Legion and the Forest Brethren.[17] May 1998 even saw Georgia again resorting to arms—fire-fights close to the Ingur repelled the attack, and Georgia once again escaped censure. Throughout this period, negotiations were still taking place, confederation being the Abkhazians' maximum concession. Finally, exasperated with Georgian recalcitrance, the Abkhazians formally declared independence in late 1999, when they introduced amendments to the constitution that had been approved by referendum on 26 November 1994.

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By this time, Western, particularly U.S., interest in Georgia had suddenly risen exponentially under the lure of transport-routes for Caspian oil that avoided both the Gulf and Russia. In 1999, contracts were signed for three pipelines: Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, and, most importantly, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan. With most of the Abkhazians effectively deprived of their fundamental human right to travel outside their country after the final expiry of Soviet passports and the sheer disdain evinced by most at any suggestion they apply for Georgian passports, President Vladimir Putin allowed them to apply for Russian passports beginning from around 2001. Initially, these were so expensive that few could afford them, given Abkhazia's strained economy, but the price has fallen. It is estimated that today 80 percent of the Abkhazian population possess Russian passports. In 2006, the Psou-border was opened to all possessing appropriate documentation, and, in spring 2008, Russia lifted the CIS blockade.

Despite Western backing, Shevardnadze became increasingly unpopular at home for the air of stagnation that surrounded his presidency. He was overthrown before the television cameras by his former protégé, Saak'ashvili, a Ukrainian/Dutch/U.S.-educated lawyer with a flare for languages. The West, especially the United States, promptly transferred its support to the usurper, without waiting for him to secure electoral legitimacy, which came in early 2004, just as in Spring/Summer of 1992 Georgia under

Shevardnadze's mandate-less regime had been showered with benefits.

The advent of a new Georgian president might have been the moment to manifest a sense of realism vis-à-vis Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, any such opportunity was squandered yet again, as Saak'ashvili set himself the nationalist goals of regaining the lost territories, including the Muslim-Georgian region of Ach'ara in the southwest during his first presidential term, offering Abkhazians the same old "maximal autonomy" until early 2008, when the offer, 19 years too late, became a special federal arrangement. After peacefully regaining Ach'ara in May 2004, Saak'ashvili turned his attention to South Ossetia. As for Abkhazia, troops, allegedly mere policemen that were needed to restore order[18] entered the Upper K'odor Valley in the spring of 2006, Abkhazia's only region still under Tbilisi's control. They were quickly joined by the so-called "Abkhazian Government-in-exile." This provocation, which saw tourist numbers plummet in the expectation of renewed fighting, produced no immediate Abkhazian response other than to halt the negotiations. Saak'ashvili engaged in bouts of verbal sparring with Putin in his baiting of the Russian bear, strengthened Georgia's Western orientation, sought NATO-membership, won U.S. military aid and training, and purchased huge quantities of U.S., Ukrainian, and Israeli weaponry. Alarm bells sounded in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the April 2008 Bucharest NATO meeting, reportedly at the insistence of certain East European members with their agenda of vendetta against the Kremlin, instead of dismissing George Bush's ill-considered proposal to offer Georgia membership, promised reconsideration in December.

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Whatever motivated Saak'ashvili's decision to bombard Tskhinval and other targets with tanks and Grad-missiles on 7 August—especially with the delayed release of the OSCE report affirming that Georgia was the aggressor[19]—his hubris summoned a double-fronted nemesis. Implementing their mutual defense pact with Tskhinval, the Abkhazians acted to clear the K'odor; on 12 August, after a weekend's bombing, Georgian forces fled from Abkhazian ground forces along the Ingur, abandoning in addition to their store of munitions a computer containing nine incriminating photographs of two U.S. military contractors demonstrating to attentive Georgian soldiers techniques in improvised bomb-making, an unexpected action on the part of the representatives of a government that vaunts its post-9/11 anti-terror credentials.[20]

Conclusions

The international community indirectly condemned the Abkhazians, South Ossetians, and the various Kartvelian peoples caught up in the subsequent hostilities to great suffering by ratifying Georgia's Stalin-drawn Soviet borders. Gamsakhurdia had already

brought death and destruction to South Ossetia, but now Shevardnadze felt emboldened to act with impunity in Abkhazia (1992–1993; 1998), followed by Saak'ashvili's mindlessness in South Ossetia (2008).[21] All the while, the West has blindly supported Georgia's territorial integrity with a series of policies aimed at bringing the two disputed territories back under Tbilisi's thumb. The consequences have been the widespread resentment at the West's double standards and pro-Georgian bias and ever closer ties to Russia, sealed by Russia's recognition of both on 26 August 2008—the polar opposites of what the West had desired.

Georgia's historical claims to Abkhazia have no foundation. Late 1980s Georgian nationalism was responsible for awakening dormant hostilities amongst both nationalities[22]—whatever Russia might have felt about Georgia's move to independence, it could relax and enjoy the spectacle of the republic tearing itself apart. After three wars under Georgia's three post-communist presidents, any moral claims Tbilisi might advance for controlling Abkhazian and South Ossetian destinies are dead. Ideally, Georgia should have offered recognition years ago, but, if such a move is beyond the wit or daring of any Georgian leader, then the West should promptly follow Russia's lead, since the West has set its own precedent in Kosovo; Tbilisi will then have no alternative. Abkhazia, at least, could then enjoy the advantages of balanced investment and influence—South Ossetia's union with North Ossetia is the logical possibility. Any other course of action will risk turning Abkhazia into the very client-state that it has long been derided as being—something the Abkhazians themselves do not desire.

George W. Bush's administration cannot be blamed for the failure of policy that produced Georgia's 1992 recognition, but the same cannot be said of the expansion of U.S. interests in the republic, including the provision of arms, and promoting that NATO do the same. Many have rightly criticized such pointless antagonizing of Russia, which, for better or worse, has interests in Transcaucasia. It was, and will remain, folly to ignore this. Some argue that, had Russian forces stopped at South Ossetia's border in August, Moscow would have held the moral high ground. However, given the amount of weaponry in Tbilisi's hands—lodged in such bases as Gori, near South Ossetia—to have done so would have left military capability in Saak'ashvili's untrustworthy hands and exposed Abkhazia to subsequent invasion. Thus, the Gori base, in addition to the vessels in port at Poti, had to be neutralized. Collateral loss of life and property is regrettable, just as the creation of floods of refugees from the wars in the early 1990s was regrettable—no such disruption need have occurred, if Georgia's successive leaderships had pursued wiser policies. Nonetheless, a mass return of Mingrelians to areas of Abkhazia outside the Gal District is unrealistic, since the Abkhazians cannot risk being swamped again by potential fifth-columnists so susceptible to the intrigues of Tbilisi. International recognition, though, would perhaps give the Abkhazians greater

confidence to permit larger numbers to return than will otherwise happen.

To judge by the embarrassing posturing of Condoleeza Rice (U.S.), David Miliband (UK), and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (NATO) in the wake of the August events, some still hanker after repeating the futile policies of the past. The election of Barack Obama, however, presents a unique opportunity to change course and act more intelligently before the same mistakes lead to further disastrous consequences.[23] None of the disputed Transcaucasian territories, including Nagorno-Karabakh, will return to their Soviet controllers. The three should be recognized forthwith. All regional states should then be given guarantees for their security if they agree to disarm. With the full involvement of Russia, encouragement should be given to the creation of a regional Common Market, if not (Trans)Caucasian Union, to promote a spirit of cooperation and stability across the isthmus, possibly including Russia's North Caucasian territories. Continuing instability and threats of renewed conflict serve no one's interests. WA

Notes

1. But before beginning, let it be first noted that there is absolutely no genetic link between the languages spoken by the Abkhazians and the Georgians: Abkhaz is a North-Western Caucasian language related to Circassian and Ubykh which has been extinct since 1992, while Georgian is a South Caucasian, or Kartvelian, language related to Mingrelian, Laz and Svan. Ossetic, on the other hand, is an Iranian language.

2. S. Q'aukhchishvili, ed., *Georgian Chronicles*, *Volume 1* (*kartlis tsxovreba*) (1955), 281.

3. L. Tardy, "The Caucasian peoples and their neighbours in 1404," in *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung., Tomus XXXII (1)*, 83-111.

4. See Englishman James Stanislaus Bell's account of his three years among the fighting communities. J.S. Bell, *Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838, and 1839* (London: Edward Moxon, 1840).

5. Interestingly, the article was entirely omitted from the (post-Stalin/Beria) 1955 reprint of the collected works.

6. See Appendix 14 on page 482 of the 2nd volume of Bell's *Journal of a Residence*, where the word is written /agrûa/. It is based on the Kartvelian root -rg-/-gr- as seen in Mingrelian /ma-rg-al-i/ = Georgian /me-gr-el-i/, both meaning 'Mingrelian (person)'.

7. See page 21 of Givi Eliava's *megrul-kartuli leksik'oni (masalebi)* [Mingrelian-Georgian Dictionary (Materials)] (Mart'vili-Tbilisi: Intelekt'i, 1997).

8. In his new book, *The Abkhazian People's Soviet 1917-1920* (2008) (in Russian), which presents archival evidence of Tbilisi's machinations and thus demonstrates the continuity of Georgian policies with regard to Abkhazia still practiced today, Ruslan Xodzhaa quotes from his own earlier *Documents and Materials of the Abkhazian People's Soviet 1918-1919* (1999) (in Russian) on Mazniev's behaviour: "Not a single tsarist general raged as mercilessly when subjugating the Caucasian peoples as Mazniev in Abkhazia" (7)—and one should note that Mazniev behaved similarly in South Ossetia. A pertinent assessment of Georgia at this time was given by Englishman Carl Bechhofer: "The free and independent Social-Democratic government of Georgia will ever remain in my memory as a classical example of an imperialistic minor nationality both in relation to its seizure of territory to within its own borders and in relation to the bureaucratic tyranny inside the state. Its chauvinism exceeds the highest limits." Carl Bechhofer, *In Denikin's Russia and the Caucasus, 1919-1920* (London: Collins, 1921).

9. Archival accounts of these forced population-movements were collected and published in B. Sagarija, T. Achugba and V. Pachulija, *Abkhazia: Documents Bear Witness 1937-1953* (1992) (in Russian).

10. The "Father of Abkhazian Literature," Dyrmit' Gulia, who in 1925 had written the first history of

Abkhazia, was forced, in true Stalinist fashion, to recant the views expressed therein which were not in line with the new orthodoxy on the history of "Western Georgia;" see his 1951 pamphlet "On my book, *The History of Abkhazia*" (in Russian).

11. Sadly, these attempts have proved alarmingly successful, being taken up in various forms by linguists and historians who, regardless of any damage to their own reputations, do immense harm to their nation's cause by sowing seeds of hatred among knew generations seduced by such myths. A recent collective-work which falls into this category is Dzhemal Gamaxaria, et al., *Apxazeti : udzvelesi droidan dghemde ; nark'vevebi Sakartvelos ist'oriidan* (*Essays from the History of Georgia: Abkhazia*) (Tbilisi: Gamomcemloba Int'elekt'i, 2007). On the power of myth in this and other Transcaucasian hot-spots, see Victor Shnirelman *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001).

12. For a close analysis of all demographic data for Abkhazia, including evaluation of the heated debate over the population-balance existing even before the Beriaite importation of Mingrelians, see Daniel Müller's "Demography: ethno-demographic history, 1886-1989," in ed. G. Hewitt, *The Abkhazians: a Handbook* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 218-239.

13. Personal communication.

14. The first came on 25 August 1992 when the head of Georgian fighters, Gia Q'arq'arashvili, stated on TV that he would sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to wipe out all 97,000 Abkhazians, if that is what was needed to preserve Georgia's borders. The second was published in April 1993 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* when Giorgi Khaindrava, minister for minorities and later chief-negotiator with the Abkhazians, wrote that only ten to fifteen thousand young Abkhazians needed to be killed to destroy their gene-pool, adding: "We are perfectly capable of doing this."

15. Though Yeltsin was just over the Abkhazian border in Sochi when the Georgian troops invaded, he was mysteriously unavailable to answer Ardzinba's frantic attempts to contact him in the hope that he might be persuaded to deter his former Politburo colleague from continuing down the path to all-out war. This has led to the suspicion that Yeltsin knew in advance of Shevardnadze's plans and gave him the green light to win what was probably expected to be a speedy Georgian victory.

16. This question is addressed by Dodge Billingsley in "Military aspects of the war: the turning point," in Hewitt, *The Abkhazians*, 147-156.

17. On 13th June 1998, the British daily *The Guardian* published an interview with Zurab Samushia, leader of the White Legion, who claimed they had "executed" 47 members of the the CIS peacekeeping forces. Georgian journalist, Ak'ak'i Mikadze, writing in *Vremja*, 3rd June 1998, stated: "The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Security actively support the partisan-groupings operating in the Gal Region. For example, fighters from the division called 'Forest Brethren' officially receive wages of 200 lari (about $150), while their commander, criminal authority David Shengelia, receives 300 lari (about $220). The division supposedly numbers about 700, for whom wages and allowances are set aside from the budget."

18. Saak'ashvili may have exposed his own two-year lie about the nature of this unit, when he admits in his interview with Raphaël Glucksman: "Le 8 août...nos meilleures troupes étaient en Irak et au Sud-Est de l'Abkhasie" [On the 8th August our best troops were in Iraw and the south-east of Abkhazia] (cited from the manuscript of Mikhail Saakashvili, *Je Vous Parle de Liberté* (eventually published in Paris by Hachette, 2008). The quantity of heavy weaponry subsequently found abandoned in the Valley also suggests a more sinister purpose.

19. Georgia's Deputy Ambassador to London, Giorgi Badridze, cynically informed his BBC World viewers at the time that only Georgians could best protect the interests of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, a self-delusion that led the head of the surely obsolete Ministry for Reintegration, Teimuraz Iak'obashvili, to tell an audience at Tbilisi State University on 14 November that Georgia had a "mission to save the Abkhazians and South Ossetians from Russian domination." Consider in this context the following: "A Russian political analyst told me about a Georgian minister who has been a friend of his since schooldays. 'When we get together and have a drink, he tells me how he thinks the Abkhaz are scum and he wishes he could hang them all…But when he talks to the west, suddenly it's human rights, democracy, rule of law…'" Shaun Walker, "The Kosovo Precedent," *Prospect Magazine*, April 2008.

20. For the others see www.warandpeace.ru.

21. This was Saak'ashvilli's second attempt to recapture South Ossetia, his first venture occurring in 2004.

22. Though the Abkhazians watched apprehensively the growing presence on their territory of Mingrelian settlers, in practice the two communities were integrated with many mixed marriages. Abkhazians even today say they pity the Mingrelians: "At least we Abkhazians know our identity. Mingrelians have been instructed to view themselves as Georgians, and so they no longer know who they are," is a common observation.

23. For this purpose all proponents of the "old thinking," such as (to judge by his interviews from Tbilisi in August) Richard Holbrooke, will need to be kept well away from discussions pertaining to Caucasian affairs.