

The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict:
Why Independence for Abkhazia is the Best Solution
George Hewitt

Historical Background

Bagrat' III (d. 7th May 1014) was the first ruler of the united feudal kingdom of Georgia, having inherited the 200 year-old 'Kingdom of Abkhazia' (which encompassed not only today's Abkhazia but western Georgia too) from his mother. In the Georgian chronicles he (and his successors) carried the title /mepe apxazta da kartvelta/ 'King of the Abkhazians and Kartvelians' in recognition of the role played by the Abkhazians in creating this union. The arrival of the Mongols in the 13th century dissolved it into smaller statelets, of which Abkhazia (under the Chachba ruling family) was one. The political border with neighbouring Mingrelia (under the Dadiani ruling family) was set along the R. Ingur in the 1680s. It has remained here ever since, serving today as the front line between *de facto* independent Abkhazia and post-Soviet Georgia. In the north, Abkhazian speakers traditionally occupied the coastal strip upto the R. Mzymta, where settlements belonging to their Ubykh cousins began; further north (upto the R. Kuban and in land) lived the various communities of their other cousins, the Circassians¹. Since the Mzymta lies north of Abkhazia's current border with Russia (R. Psou), any Abkhazian irredentist claims would be lodged in Moscow (not Tbilisi)!

Over the centuries the littoral attracted Genoese, Ottoman and Catholic missionary interest, but little altered the population-distribution until the tsars moved south, having gained a foothold in Transcaucasia with the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk between Catherine the Great and Erekle II, king of the central and eastern Georgian kingdoms of Kartli and K'akheti. At the end of the Great Caucasian War (1864), all Ubykhs plus most Circassians and Abkhazians migrated to Ottoman territory — a further outflow followed the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. As of 1878, then, the Abkhazians would have regarded the Russians as their worst nightmare. This is what the Georgians think their attitude should still be. But history moved on...

Roots of the Problem

Georgian educationalist Iak'ob Gogebashvili argued in 1877 that the Mingrelians were the ideal 'colonisers' for Abkhazia's denuded spaces, being more easily acclimatisable to its yet undrained swamp-lands, and immigration began. Independent Menshevik Georgia (1918-21) saw both Abkhazia and South Ossetia subjected to extreme violence to bring/keep them under Georgian control. After the Red Army

¹Abkhaz, Circassian and the now extinct Ubykh form the North West Caucasian language-family, which has no genetic link to Georgian, which belongs to the South Caucasian family along with Mingrelian, Svan and Laz.

brought Transcaucasia into the Bolshevik fold, Abkhazia's full republican status was recognised by Georgia on 21st May 1921. However, after securing his position in the Kremlin, Stalin (Ioseb Dzhughashvili) reduced Abkhazia to the status of an autonomous republic within his native Georgia. From 1937 to 1953 a policy of repression (over and above that of the Great Terror) was applied in Abkhazia. Measures included:

- forced implantation of huge numbers of Mingrelians (plus some Georgians), radically altering the demographics;
- shift of the Abkhaz alphabet from a roman to a Georgian base;
- closure of Abkhaz language-schools;
- banning of publishing/broadcasting in Abkhaz;
- planned expulsion of the Abkhazians to Siberia/Central Asia, a fate they escaped by a whisker, as it was felt that enough had otherwise been done to mingrelianise/georgianise them within a couple of generations.

One particularly loathsome feature was the publication of a blatant distortion of Abkhazian history, concocted to justify any transportation, by P'avle Ingoroq'va, who argued that today's Abkhazians arrived in Transcaucasia only in the 17th century, displacing and taking the name of history's 'true' Abkhazians, who were a Georgian tribe! This slander was revived in late 1988 and is widely believed throughout Georgia, having been taken up by several writers and scholars in the evident belief that serving nationalism is nobler than serving the truth. This explains why so many Georgians refer to Abkhazians as 'Apswaa'. This is what Abkhazians call themselves, and, at first glance, it might seem that those Georgians who adopt it are actually shewing respect for their neighbours' self-designation. In fact, its use is an insult, implying that 'Abkhazians' equate to Georgians, whereas 'Apswaa' are their usurpers and, thus, foreign interlopers on 'Georgian' soil. Though anti-Abkhazian measures were put into reverse after the deaths of Stalin and (Abkhazian-born Mingrelian) Lavrent'i Beria in 1953, problems remained.

Discontent Persists

The American sovietologist Darrell Slider has demonstrated that *per capita* investment in Abkhazia remained lower than in the rest of Soviet Georgia. Periodic demonstrations in Abkhazia in the late 50s, late 60s, and 1978 indicated the level of continuing resentment at the situation. The 1978 disturbances saw Georgian road-signs painted over. This followed the sending by 130 intellectuals in December 1977 of a letter to the Kremlin requesting that Abkhazia be administratively transferred from the Georgian SSR to the Russian Federation. Whilst this might be interpreted as an early indication of the pro-Russian bias many see as motivating Abkhazians today, the answer to such a charge would be the same as that applying in the current crisis,

namely: what alternative did/do they have? The upshot was that the Kremlin did not then dare to enrage the Georgian bull. The intellectuals lost their jobs, but Georgian Party Boss, Eduard Shevardnadze, was dispatched to assuage passions by establishing in the Abkhazian capital Sukhum (Aq^W'a) Georgia's second only university — previously, Batumi in Ach'ara had been earmarked for this honour.

Confrontation

Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost'* the voicing of local grievances, and so the Abkhazians restated long-held objections to subordination to Tbilisi in 'The Abkhazian Letter', sent secretly to Moscow on 17th June 1988. The *perestrojka*-reforms led to a weakening of the Kremlin's grip, especially on the Soviet periphery, and nationalism exploded amongst various nationalities, including the Georgians. From late 1988 the outpourings of not only leaders of the unofficial opposition but also several journalists and scholars, who should have known better what a dangerous genie they were letting out of the bottle, were particularly venomous about Georgia's numerous minorities (predominantly the Abkhazians, Azerbaijanis, S. Ossetians, and Daghestanis in eastern Georgia). When the existence of 'The Abkhazian Letter' became public knowledge in Georgia is unclear, but its sentiments were endorsed by representatives of all the ethnic groups living in Abkhazia at a public meeting in Lykhny on 18th March 1989, and anti-Abkhazian feelings were aired at the demonstration for Georgian independence that led to killings by Soviet troops in the centre of Tbilisi on 9th April.

The establishment of Aйдгыларა 'Unity', the Abkhazian national forum (like that of the parallel organisation Adæmon Nykhas in S. Ossetia) was, however, essentially a reaction, conditioned by alarming developments in central Georgia. The unofficial Georgian oppositionists manufactured an artificial dispute centred around the Abkhazian State University; the Georgian sector broke away and agitated for a rival branch of Tbilisi University to be set up to cater for their needs. On the eve of entrance-exams to this illegal structure, the first fatal ethnic clashes took place in Sukhum and Ochamchira (to the south-east) on 15-16th July 1989 — there was also loss of life at around the same time in Marneuli-Dmanisi, the Azerbaijani-populated area of Georgia. On 17th July Soviet Interior Ministry troops were introduced to keep the two (Abkhazian, Mingrelian/Georgian) communities apart, but, even so, for some three weeks after the fighting, which evidence amassed by the late Viktor Popkov demonstrated to have been pre-planned on the Georgian side (see *The Abkhazians: a handbook*, edited by G. Hewitt, Curzon Press, 1998), the atmosphere remained horribly tense.

War

Political games continued to be played over the next three years. Zviad

Gamsakhurdia was elected Georgia's president in 1990 and soon began his 2-year war in S. Ossetia. Though most Georgians boycotted the referendum on Gorbachev's proposed new Union Treaty on 17th March 1991, a majority of Abkhazia's eligible electorate voted in favour (i.e. against secession). But the Treaty was never signed, as Gorbachev was overthrown, and the USSR disintegrated. Georgia thus gained independence. The West, however, refrained from recognising the country under the unstable character heading it. Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a coup in January 1992; civil war followed in Mingrelia, Gamsakhurdia's native region. In March the coup-leaders shrewdly invited Shevardnadze home from Moscow-retirement to lead his original fiefdom. From that moment the West has committed a series of errors in relations with Georgia which not only helped stoke the war but have inflamed post-war crises developments.

Though civil war was still raging and Shevardnadze did not achieve electoral legitimacy until 11th October 1992, the UK led the EU in both recognising Georgia (within the frontiers gifted to it by Stalin) and establishing diplomatic relations the very month of Shevardnadze's return. This was followed by further precipitate action, as Georgia was granted membership of the IMF, World Bank and the UN. The West, thereby, lost all chance of acting as honest broker in ending the civil war and restraining Georgian impetuosity in Abkhazia, as territorial integrity became the overriding imperative, and blind eyes were turned to whatever nefarious actions were perpetrated by the central government within its internationally recognised borders. Shevardnadze celebrated Georgia's UN membership by unleashing war in Abkhazia on 14th August. The only logical explanation for this disastrous decision is that he was seeking to rally Gamsakhurdia's supporters to the 'patriotic' (i.e. his) cause by portraying the Abkhazians as the common foe. The gamble failed, for the Zviadists continued the fight. The Gal Mingrelians, being in large measure descendants of Abkhazians who succumbed relatively early to mingrelianisation, tended towards neutrality, and this is one reason why the Abkhazians have been quite sanguine about allowing them to stay in/return to Gal. But Abkhazia's Kartvelian population north of the Gal District, essentially the communities implanted in the 1930s, enthusiastically supported the invasion.

During the war the Abkhazians lost 4% of their population (and suffered the deliberate torching of their archives in a Georgian attempt to eradicate documentary proof of the Abkhazian presence on Abkhazian soil). The Georgian general in charge of troops in the autumn of 1992, Gia Q'arq'arashvili, was filmed issuing this threat: 'I am prepared to sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to kill all 93,000 Abkhazians, if that is what it takes to keep Georgia's borders inviolate.' The Abkhazians in alliance with volunteers from the diaspora and the North Caucasus (predominantly Circassians and

Chechens) proclaimed victory on 30th September 1993, though they never regained control of the Upper K'odor Valley, where a population of Svans has lived since the 19th-century migrations. The majority of the circa 240,000 Kartvelians living in Abkhazia in 1989 fled before the Abkhazian forces reached their settlements (in what was thus an act of self-cleansing) only to be appallingly treated by the Georgian authorities, who have used them as tools to win sympathy from the West. Peace-accords were signed in April 1994 in Moscow establishing a demilitarised zone along the Ingur to be supervised by 3,000 Russian troops on behalf of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) — Shevardnadze had joined the CIS to help quash the final Zviadist rebellion that threatened western Georgia following the loss of Abkhazia.

Post-war Developments

Abkhazia faced economic disaster: the theatre of fighting (Ochamchira-T'q^Warchal up to the northern outskirts of Sukhum along the R. Gumista) had roads pot-holed by tanks, bridges blown up, mines in the undergrowth (finally cleared only in 2007), and shelled or burned skeletons of houses/apartment-blocks (still eerily standing); the single-track railway was inoperative; transport was in crisis, such had been the scale of looting; the phone-system hardly worked (for years). Terrorist-attacks were carried out by such Georgian-government sponsored groups operating out of Mingrelia as The Forest Brethren and The White Legion. In 1996, at Georgian insistence, the short-lived boat-link to Trebizond was stopped, the CIS imposed a blockade (lifted only in 2008, as Russo-Georgian relations plumbed new depths), and Russia closed the Psou-border to all but Russian passport-holders, though it was reopened in 2006; as old Soviet passports ran out, Abkhazians found themselves for several years unable to travel beyond Russia, until Vladimir Putin allowed them to acquire Russian documents from 2001. In 1998 the Georgians again resorted to arms but were beaten back. Despite all, Abkhazia has struggled to rebuild its economy and establish a democratic state with both regular parliamentary and presidential elections — it promulgated a new Constitution and declared formal independence in December 1999, rejecting any idea of reintegration within Georgia; tourism in the main northern resorts is back to Soviet levels, and each year there is a greater air of prosperity, though wages are low, and certain areas (like Ochamchira) cry out for investment.

Post-war Georgia spent years in the throes of lawlessness, almost becoming a failed state. Shevardnadze slowly dragged it from the brink, and, as the question of transporting Caspian oil westwards came on the agenda, western interest grew. Investment, military help, and membership of the Council of Europe (1999) followed. Dissatisfaction with corruption and general inertia, however, led to the Rose

Revolution (November 2003), when the young pretender, Mikheil Saak'ashvili, ousted the White Fox. After his election, he quickly reimposed central control on Ach'ara on the Turkish border and boasted that S. Ossetia and Abkhazia would follow. In 2006, in contravention of the 1994 accords, he introduced Georgian military personnel into the Upper K'odor Valley, calling it a 'policing operation'. Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh immediately suspended peace-talks, and they have not resumed. On the eve of NATO's Bucharest meeting (April 2008), Saak'ashvili suddenly produced a new peace-plan; previously all that had been offered to Abkhazia was a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, whereas now federalism is proposed. Whilst the proposal has achieved its goal (of impressing Georgia's western friends), it has come 19 years too late for it to be taken seriously by the Abkhazians — and what of such other minorities as the Armenians of Dzhavakheti, the Azerbaijanis of Dmanisi-Marneuli, or the S. Ossetians?

What now?

Abkhazians do not trust the Georgians, who have only themselves to blame for their woes in the disputed regions; they see them as openly hostile to all their minorities, even lacking respect for the languages of their Kartvelian kin (Mingrelians and Svans). Abkhazians are also suspicious of the West, which ignores Georgian:

- human rights' abuses (as bravely chronicled over the years at: www.humanrights.ge);
- infringements of electoral practices, including restricting opposition-access to the media (see various pages at www.messenger.com.ge) and intimidation of voters and/or candidates (www.civilgeorgia.ge/eng/article.php?id=17803);
- police-brutality against anti-government demonstrators and closure of the independent Imedi TV-channel on 7th November 2007;
- failure to implement Georgia's condition for membership of the Council of Europe in 1999, namely to resettle within 12 years the Meskhetians, deported by Stalin in 1944, who wish to return to Meskheti.

Abkhazians assert that they did not win a war they never sought and suffer 15 years of privations only to become irrelevant minnows in another state's (Russia's) backwater. They (and the Armenians and Russians who constitute a majority of the population) demand Abkhazia's *de facto* independence become *de iure*, with secure international guarantees of non-aggression. That would allow their economy to flourish from tourism and give them the confidence, once the dilapidated housing-stock is rebuilt, to attract home both members of their own diaspora (based in Turkey, where numbers exceed 300,000) and more of the Kartvelian refugees who fled in 1993, though it is unclear how many of the latter would choose to return to territory outside Georgian control. With Abkhazia independent and neutral, Russia would gain

by not having an immediate border with Georgia (inside or outside NATO). Georgia would benefit by having its rail-link to Russia restored and being freed from constant tension along the Ingur — Georgia did, after all, lose the war it initiated and must accept the consequences flowing therefrom.

Georgia exhibits no such inclination, ascribing its travails to Russia's imperial machinations, and relies on intrigues with the West and NATO to solve them. Since no-one believes that NATO would go to war over Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, the fear is that Georgia might risk a preemptive strike before NATO's decision on membership. Whether this explains Saak'ashvili's latest manoeuvrings in the K'odor Valley or whether they are just dangerous games to increase his popularity in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 21st May is unclear. But Russia's increase in its peace-keepers is to forestall any further bloodshed. If NATO takes minority-rights seriously, it should state unequivocally that Georgian membership will be removed from the agenda, if there is any attempt to retake Abkhazia by force.

Whatever one thinks of Russo-Georgian relations in general, the Russian military presence in Abkhazia has preserved 14 years of peace. Western spokesmen (particularly those conditioned by Cold War mindsets) frequently voice concerns at Russian moves in Abkhazia, and yet the West's rigidly pro-Georgian stance, unchanged since the first mistake of precipitate recognition in 1992, has done nothing but drive Abkhazia ever deeper into Russia's embrace.

Only one just solution beckons — full independence for Abkhazia. 'In international law Abkhazia is a secessionist state of Georgia,' mouth the politicians, diplomats and pro-Georgian lobbyists. True, but to satisfy the higher demands of justice Abkhazia's legal position has to change. This is what Georgia's real friends should be counselling it to recognise and accept — for everybody's sake.