

GEORGIA

Unholy trinity

Donald Rayfield outlines Eduard Shevardnadze's shaky status, as Georgia's triumvirate provokes bloodshed in Abkhazia

“Who would have thought I would love Shevardnadze.” I heard from Tbilisi’s intellectuals this summer, as they recovered from the winter putsch and economic crash. Bulldozers were clearing the rubble, trolley buses not destroyed on the barricades were running on bright new copper cables, and citizens with cash could buy Russian champagne, Turkish chocolates and canisters of Azeri petrol. The figure of ex-president Zviad Gamsakhurdia had shrunk to a Grand Guignol puppet. His supporters, testosterone-fuelled Bacchantes who had been stabbing suspected “red intellectuals” in the genitals with scissors, melted back to matriarchy. You might forgive Eduard Shevardnadze his murderous past in the communist police and party, and conclude that the return of the master fixer had brought stability.

A car bomb as I landed in Tbilisi and, ten days later, several hundred Gamsakhurdia supporters storming Tbilisi’s TV station proved, however, that Shevardnadze was a Frankenstein overpowered by his monster. The former Soviet foreign minister is the gunmen’s asset: he can disarm Osetian rebels with his “tell-me-what-you-want” negotiating technique—too mesmerising, since his hypnotised opposite numbers are then disowned by their angry supporters. Shevardnadze has won Georgia international recognition denied to Gamsakhurdia’s idiotic regime, and even lured embassies and businessmen to Tbilisi. But he has no gunmen of his own, and, until the promised elections this October, no mandate: to get his way, he can only threaten to resign from the triumvirate that heads Georgia’s “state council”.

Power in Georgia resides with Jaba Ioseliani, leader of the apocalyptic paramilitary *Mkhedrioni*, “The Horsemen”, who in 1990 installed Gamsakhurdia by provoking ethnic minorities, and then toppled him last Christmas. Ioseliani commands the guns,

and it is his nominees who enforce his rule. Ioseliani would boggle the mind of Gabriel Garcia Márquez: what irony that Shevardnadze, who did so much to make him, should become his instrument. But for Shevardnadze, Ioseliani would be at worst in quicklime, at best a Siberian gangster. As a teenager, he brought off Leningrad’s biggest bank robbery: Stalin, no amateur himself, took note, and Ioseliani became a star of Soviet crime: in his cell no prisoner dared smoke and his clothes were laundered by the guards. Reprieved by Shevardnadze, he easily recast himself as professor of oriental languages, playwright and paramilitary.

When I met him, his desk was awash with papers, including a novel he had written in prison and photographs of 36 Osetian refugees slaughtered by Georgians. He explained his survival under Gamsakhurdia by his command of the system: he chose to be arrested, rather than shot in the forests where his men were camped, and immediately took charge of the prison. Gamsakhurdia moved him to the KGB *isolator*, constantly phoning orders to poison him. But the secret police feared Ioseliani’s coup might succeed: when the prison was shelled, they released their captive, who returned just to retrieve his manuscripts from the burnt-out ruins.

As a Soviet *vor v zakone* (“thief in the law”), Ioseliani never shirks bloodshed. His men are fed by rackets—a monopoly of petrol; he whisks men off for expeditions against “bandits”; this he will announce *post factum* to the helpless “state council” that is supposed to govern Georgia until elections. Shevard-

was a fellow-prisoner of one Osetian leader, Kulumbegov, but offers no restoration of south Osetia’s autonomy. The Osetians are abandoned: first, Yeltsin owes Shevardnadze favours and backs Georgia against other Caucasian nations; second, the militant North Caucasian federation embraces Chechens, Circassians, Abkhaz and Dagestanis, but ostracises the Osetians.

Shevardnadze’s latest mistake is to condone Ioseliani’s invasion of Abkhazia once pacification of Mingrelia—the lawless west from the Black Sea coast to the central mountains—had turned into hot pursuit of kidnapers of Georgian ministers. Shevardnadze found charisma ineffective in towns such as Senaki, where Gamsakhurdia remains a divinity; Ioseliani felt he had nothing to lose from violence against Mingrelia. For the past 50 years most Mingrelians (who have a distinct, though unwritten, language) in southern Abkhazia and western Georgia have called themselves Georgians; now under attack from Tbilisi, they redefine themselves as Kartvelians, not Georgians, just as the Scots see themselves as British, not English.

To cross from Mingrelia to Abkhazia is only too easy. In the south of Abkhazia, people speak both languages: villagers have mixed marriages. Two years ago, when Gamsakhurdia classified the Mingrelians as Georgians and dismissed the Abkhaz as migrants from the mountains and agents of the Kremlin, 1,000 years of ethnic mingling unravelled. On 14 August, when Vladislav Ardzinba, installed as *de facto* president, was due to negotiate with Shevardnadze, Ioseliani treacherously crossed the river Galizga

into Abkhazia proper: Mingrelians and Abkhaz now have a common cause.

Anyone forced to live in the former USSR would choose Abkhazia—for its climate, scenery, hospitality and natural wealth. I was struck, however, when I drove from Moscow across the Circassian Caucasus, to see once-crowded

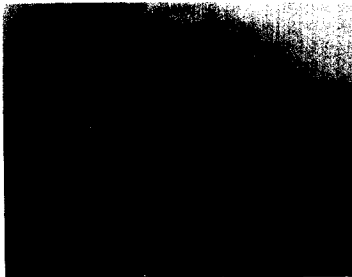
Shevardnadze can disarm Osetian rebels with his “tell-me-what-you-want” negotiating technique

Black Sea resorts deserted and drivers along the coast road in fear of bandits. At the Russian-Abkhaz border, an Abkhaz militia and Russian troops in identical uniform manned checkpoints. The traffic police were replaced by armed Abkhaz, wooden barriers by concrete barricades. Sukhumi was now a drab and impoverished provincial Russian town: the central hotel had burnt down, the 1980s potholes were 1990s tank traps.

Politically, Sukhumi was transformed: the Georgians had lost control and Tbilisi-appointed ministers sat in offices without telephones or paper. My friend Vladislav Ardzinba, once a deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet, now has a caucus of aides and ministers from the Abkhaz Institute of Language, Literature and History, which he still directs. As I arrived he was on television speaking in Abkhaz and Russian, urging calm against the threat of Georgian invasion. He dissuaded me from driving on to Tbilisi.

nadze exerts no leverage over Ioseliani. The third of the triumvirate, Tengiz Kitovani, commands the “official” army, the national guard, with Napoleonic panache. But two bullets are lodged in his brain. He barely cramps Ioseliani’s style and his response to questions is, “Don’t confuse me.”

Seized by a mafioso manipulating a communicator, Georgia is in a lethal stranglehold. Privatisation cannot work while paramilitaries control wool and mineral exports, food and oil imports; the economy cannot break with the hyperinflated rouble (and so few roubles circulate that salaries are unpaid for months and nobody can rebuild the blown-up bridges and railway tracks). Worst of all, Ioseliani is pursuing the chauvinism of communist and theocratic predecessors. True, peace has been bought in southern Osetia, with joint Georgian-Osetian patrols and Russian peace-keeping forces in Tskhinvali until next November. Ioseliani



Spensphoto

The lynching of Paulinho Paiakan

Alexander Cockburn questions the allegations of rape being made against American Indian Paulinho Paiakan

stored my car in his government bunker, and handed me an air ticket. At lunch, a pistol in his pocket, he was adamant that he would not compromise with the Georgians: he would not just retain Abkhaz autonomy, but take full independence. Next to him sat Stanislav Lakoba, a sharp-witted, embittered historian, a survivor of the clan of Abkhaz hero Nestor Lakoba, whom Stalin patronised and then abandoned to Beria's clutches. Ardzinba talks like a sophisticated Muscovite, looks like a European liberal, but thinks like a Caucasian. If some Georgians and Russians believe Shevardnadze a victim of miscalculation who seeks a redeemer's role, Ardzinba, the Abkhaz and virtually the entire north Caucasus believe he is playing Mephistopheles to Ioseliani's Beelzebub, plotting to enslave all Caucasians.

Ardzinba's government lasted long enough for me to recover my car for the journey north. Georgian tanks have now holed him in the port of Gudauta: his lifeline across the sealed border is by sea to Russia. Hundreds of Abkhaz are dead; as a minority (about a fifth of half a million inhabitants—Mingrelians, Russians, Armenians, Greeks—of Abkhazia), what support can they expect? Ardzinba's associates gravitate to northern Abkhazia, where the second language is Russian; the southern Abkhaz are Georgian-orientated, and may surrender to Tbilisi's hegemony. A futile war has begun. It will drive out the Turkish businessmen who were to rebuild the ports and set up factories in Abkhazia and Mingrelia. Worse, this conflagration, added to the turmoil in Osetia and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, may detonate a Great Caucasian War. The nations of the North Caucasus are rediscovering ethnic pride. The diaspora, hounded in the 1850s by Russia into the Ottoman empire, is returning—Circassians from Syria and Israel, Abkhaz from Turkey. The ex-communist authorities of Circassia, for instance, offer repatriates dual nationality and smallholdings to redress their demographic balance. Smouldering hostility to the Russians, from Nicolas I to Brezhnev, is matched by traditional enmity towards the Georgians, from Queen Tamar to Shevardnadze.

Abkhazia has been a vassal of Georgia for a thousand years, although the survival of its indigenous language and culture shows how lightly this fiefdom weighed. But the autonomy Stalin granted Abkhazia was fictitious; and under Beria the Georgians finished the Russian's policy of rendering the Abkhaz a minority in their country. Ardzinba was wrong to declare independence—no Georgian politician can concede it; but Shevardnadze has done worse in letting his generals threaten the Abkhaz with genocide. America and Europe may affirm Georgia's territorial integrity, but to connive at violent integration is callous and complacent. A conference, initiated by Russia, Turkey and Iran, might douse the fire, by creating a neutral confederate Caucasus. It might even save Shevardnadze's skin, repaying our debt to him for ending nuclear confrontation.

Donald Rayfield is head of the department of Russian at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London

The fight to save the world's tropical rainforests has spawned its heroes and its martyrs, none more renowned than Chico Mendes, the leader of the rubber tappers, who was gunned down in the western Amazon four years ago. Since Mendes' murder, the man who has perhaps come best to symbolise the struggle to beat back the exploiters of the Amazon and its inhabitants is an Indian chief named Paulinho Paiakan, of the Kayapo tribe who live on a tributary of the Xingu river. Paiakan led the fight in the late 1980s to beat back a scheme, partially financed by the World Bank, to submerge millions of acres of rainforest in a network of dams. He had been instrumental in securing the rights of tribes to control their natural resources—timber and minerals—eyed hungrily by Brazilians chafing at Indian assertion of ancestral rights. Paiakan has become a familiar figure far beyond Brazil. He has toured the world raising money for the Kayapo cause. He has received a UN award for his environmental work. The film-director, Ridley Scott, who made *Blade Runner* and *Thelma and Louise*, is interested in his life story.

But now Paiakan's stature as an indigenous and environmental leader is threatening to crumble. And if his career ends in disgrace, and maybe a prison cell, the rainforest, and the rainforest movement itself, will have sustained a serious blow. Already Brazil's powerful timber, mining and ranching interests are clamouring for an end to restrictions on exploitation of native reserves. Some international groups are shunning Paiakan, and leaving the Kayapo without vital support.

Paiakan's potential downfall stems from charges of rape. On 10 June, even as the Earth Summit was under way in Rio de Janeiro, the mass-circulation weekly *Veja* ran a picture of Paiakan on its cover. Across it were written the words, "The Savage".

The case against Paiakan, as recounted by *Veja* reporters Laurentino Gomes and Paulo Silber, seemed overwhelming. On the last Sunday in May, the Kayapo chief took his wife Irekran, his little girl Maia and some relatives to a spot he owned outside Redencao, a town on the edge of Kayapo lands. He also invited along a young non-Indian woman of 18 called Leticia Ferreira.

At the end of the day, after a fair amount of beer-drinking, Paiakan set off home with Irekran and Maia in the front seat of his white

Chevette, and Ferreira in the back. As *Veja* described it, Paiakan soon stopped the car on the empty, dark road, turned off the lights and locked both doors. He and Irekran jumped over the seat and attacked Ferreira. *Veja* quoted Redencao police chief José Barbosa as saying the car was so bloodied it looked as though an animal had been butchered in it. Doctors, said the magazine, confirmed Ferreira had been raped. Paiakan, supposedly, had confessed his assault.

The *Veja* story was striking for a number of reasons. There was, first and foremost, racism, with bountiful verbal drapery about "the explosion of the savage instinct", "acts of cannibalism" and "a macabre, an incomprehensible ritual". There was, second, a kind of violent glee at the discomfiture to first-world environmentalists that Paiakan's alleged crime would cause: "The stereotype image of Savage Purity will collapse in many places in the world as news of Paiakan's crime spreads. Paiakan, more than any other Indian, symbolised the modern Hollywood version of the Indian: the ideal savage, full of ancestral knowledge, virtuous in his ecological universe—primitive and perfect. He is an Indian of the new generation, like the one created in films like *Dances with Wolves* by Kevin Costner. Unfortunately, this is only a reinvention of the Indian, as false as in the savage portrayed in the John Wayne films as the cruel redskin, always ready to scalp the white man. Hollywood substituted one fantasy for another, and white society began to look for the reincarnation of the fantasy in the tropical jungles of the world."

In subsequent articles, *Veja* returned obsessively to first-world interest in Indians, and particularly to the impending Ridley Scott film, focusing on Paiakan and on the American anthropologist Darrell Posey who has worked among the Kayapo for the past 15 years and who fought alongside Paiakan against the dam project, facing charges with Paiakan in Belem in consequence.

Veja's first article kicked off a lynching party. The Brazilian press exuberantly followed its lead and, with slightly more decorum, the international press followed suit.

Conspicuous in the British coverage was a similar glee at those like Anita and Gordon Roddick, proprietors of the Body Shop chain, which uses Amazonian products, who had—so the newspapers inferred—demonstrated once again the folly of trying to do good, since they, too, had placed