

Chapter 5. History: 18th Century-1917

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In the 80s of the 18th century the Abkhazian Keleshbey Chachba (Shervashidze, according to the Georgian variant of the family's surname) suddenly found himself in power as Abkhazia's sovereign prince. Over three decades he conducted an independent state-policy, successfully manoeuvring between the interests of Turkey and Russia. The prince was distinguished for his intelligence, cunning and resolution, and his name was widely known beyond the frontiers of the Caucasus. Of tall stature, with sharp lines to the face and with flaming hair, he easily stood out from those around him and arrested the attention of his contemporaries -- military men, diplomats and travellers.

Keleshbey speedily subordinated to himself the feudal aristocracy of Abkhazia, relying on the minor nobility and 'pure' peasants (Abkhaz *anxa'j^wy-tskja*), each one of whom was armed with rifle, sabre and pistol. This permanent guard consisted of 500 warriors. Whenever war threatened, Keleshbey in no time at all would put out a 25,000-strong army, well armed with artillery, cavalry and even a naval flotilla. Upto 600 military galleys belonging to the ruler permanently cruised the length of the Black Sea coast from Batumi to Anapa -- the fortresses at Poti and Batumi were under the command of his nephews and kinsmen.

During the first stage of his activities Keleshbey enjoyed the military and political backing of Turkey, under whose protectorate Abkhazia found itself. At the period when these relations were flourishing, the ruler built in Sukhum a 70-cannon ship and presented it to the sultan.

However, Keleshbey, like his ruler-father Mancha (Manuchar) Chachba, who had been banished by the sultan in the middle of the 18th century to Turkey along with his brothers Shirvan and Zurab, nurtured the secret dream of a fully free and independent Abkhazian state.

Keleshbey remembered how the Turkish authorities had dealt with his family. Only his uncle Zurab had succeeded in returning to Abkhazia and becoming ruler. During the time the Chachba princes were in exile, the Esheran princes, Dzapsh-Ipa, had strengthened their position in Abkhazia, occupying the environs of Sukhum. Being unable to fight with this family, Zurab attempted to preserve friendly relations with it and even married his nephew Keleshbey to a Dzapsh-Ipa princess. Enlisting the support of this influential family, Zurab in 1771 raised a popular uprising against the Turks and expelled them from Sukhum. However, as a result of the treachery of one of the Chachbas, the Turks soon took back the Sukhum fortress and then, eliminating Zurab, recognised Keleshbey as ruler of Abkhazia.

Keleshbey kept an attentive eye on the consolidation Russia was achieving in Eastern Georgia, where in 1801 the combined kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti had been abolished. The ruler hoped that the military presence of tsarism in the Transcaucasus was a temporary phenomenon. Because of this, in 1803 he took the first purely formal step towards rapprochement with Russia, intending with its assistance to rid himself of Turkey's protectorate, which indeed happened after the unsuccessful assault of the Turkish fleet (3 military vessels and 8 rowing-boats) upon the shores of Abkhazia on 25th July 1806. Keleshbey had time to prepare and paraded an Abkhazian-Adyghean army of many thousands around the Sukhum fortress. The fleet swung about and departed.

The ruler of Abkhazia more than once launched raids into the territory of Mingrelia and Imereti; his armies reached as far as Kutaisi. On the left bank of the R. Ingur he secured for himself the fortress of Anaklia. In 1802 Keleshbey sent a 20-thousand strong army with 3 cannon against the ruler of Mingrelia, Grigori Dadiani, and took hostage his son and heir, Levan. The desperate straits of Grigori Dadiani, powerless to restrain the onslaught of the king of Imereti, Solomon II, from one side and the Abkhazian ruler Keleshbey from the other forced him to become the first in Western Georgia to have recourse to the military assistance of Russia and to enter under its protection in 1803.

From this moment Mingrelia found itself at the spearhead of Russian politics in the region. However, weak-willed Grigori Dadiani was not suited to this role; it was his energetic and power-loving wife, Nina, who captured the ever greater attention of the tsarist authorities and the military command.

On 24th October 1804 Grigori Dadiani died unexpectedly. According to the testimony of the Catholic priest Nikolaj, the ruler of Mingrelia was poisoned by roast chicken, seasoned with venom, and, when he felt unwell, he was brought pills filled with opium. Father Nikolaj informs us that all this was done by Princess Nina.

Relations between Russia and Abkhazia sharply deteriorated then and there, since the son of the poisoned ruler of Mingrelia was in the hands of Keleshbey. The tsarist authorities demanded that Levan Dadiani be handed over at once. Keleshbey's impudent refusal was answered with military action: in March 1805 the Russian general Rykgof recaptured the fortress of Anaklia. As a result of hard negotiations, the Abkhazian ruler on 2nd April 1805 returned the hostage Levan, who had become the formal Mingrelian ruler, though at the time the effective ruler of Mingrelia right until Levan's coming of age remained his mother, Nina Dadiani. In response the Abkhazian ruler again seized the fortress of Anaklia in the Ingur estuary. At just this period Keleshbey was seeking to repair foreign relations with Napoleon's France and was

even conducting a correspondence with its celebrated Minister of Foreign Affairs, Talleyrand.

With the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war (1806-1812), tsarism sought to make use of Keleshbey in its own interests, the more so as the Russians had doubted the sincerity of Keleshbey ever since he made overtures to Russia. One of the influential officials in St. Petersburg wrote in June 1806: 'It is necessary to ascertain how frank is the devotion to Russia of Keleshbey'.

In 1807 the Russian authorities directly suggested to the 60 year-old ruler of Abkhazia that he recapture the Turkish fortress at Poti, but he avoided any kind of military action. Count Gudovich, the commander of the armies of Russia in the Caucasus, was actively incited against Keleshbey by Gen. Rykgof, who had become the Abkhazian ruler's sworn enemy. Thus, in a report of 8th June 1807 Gen Rykgof notes: 'Kelesh-bek only outwardly shews his friendship to Russia'. In answer Count Gudovich addresses himself in a letter to Keleshbey with these harsh charges: 'You did not take action to help our armies against the Turks; moreover, there is a growing suspicion regarding you that you are rendering help to the Turks' (14th July 1807).

With these important documents all mention of Keleshbey ceases for about a year.

In all probability, the Russian forces in the Caucasus, spurred on by the ruler of Mingrelia, Nina Dadiani, decided to eliminate the obstinate Keleshbey and, utilising a truce with Turkey, to establish at the head of the Abkhazian principedom the ruler's illegitimate son, Seferbey, who enjoyed no right of succession but was the brother-in-law of Nina Dadiani. The main pretender to the Abkhazian throne was Keleshbey's oldest son (by his first wife, Dzapsh-Ipa), by name Aslanbey, whom they determined to discredit. To achieve these aims Seferbey, with the support of Nina Dadiani and the active collaboration of the Russian military administration in the person of General Rykgof, organised a plot against Keleshbey, as a result of which he perished in the Sukhum fortress on 2nd May 1808.

Straight after this killing the tone of the representative of the Russian administration changed in relation to the activity of Keleshbey. If about a year earlier Count Gudovich had accused the ruler of having a pro-Turkish orientation, already on 20th May 1808 he is informing Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count N.P. Rumjantsev, of 'the death of Russia's devoted servant, the Abkhazian ruler Keleshbey...'. It is from this time that the myth was created of the alleged devotion of Keleshbey Chachba to the Russian throne, and this myth exists to the present day.

The whole blame in official Russian documents of that time for the killing of Keleshbey is shifted onto Aslanbey, who is styled a 'parricide'. It was from none other than Seferbey and Rykgof that Count Gudovich received the very first accounts containing a description of this incident. At the same time the attempts of Aslanbey

himself to clarify the situation were paid no attention by the Russian command. Thus, General Rykgof in a report to Count Gudovich says of Aslanbey: 'In this evil deed he refuses to acknowledge his guilt under any pretext, referring to a plot against Keleshbey by outsiders. I have not so far responded to these letters of his...!'

Such a strange reaction on the part of the general can only betoken that he and Gudovich were well aware of the true state of affairs. It would seem that their plan was to get rid of the independent-minded Keleshbey and set Seferbey on the throne. However, this scheme was only half realised. To the immense surprise of the organisers of the plot, it transpired that Seferbey did not command any authority among the Abkhazian community, whilst the people's entire sympathies were on the side of the 'parricide' Aslanbey, now ruler of Abkhazia. Such a turn of events did not at all suit the tsarist authorities, and especially Nina Dadiani. Thus, on 8th June 1808 she informed the Russian emperor, Aleksandr I, that with her in Zugdidi was 'our brother-in-law Sefer-bey' (he was married to Tamar Dadiani, sister of Grigori), who had given in her home an oath of fidelity to Russia and requested the help and assistance of the Russian forces in the struggle with the new ruler, Aslanbey. The ruler of Mingrelia writes that, in the event of Seferbey being recognised and Abkhazia being accepted as a subject of Russia, the border of the empire will be extended to the Crimea, for 'the Abkhazians are not few in number'. In reality Nina Dadiani was striving not so much for Russia as much as to pursue her own goals, well understanding the strategic and commercial importance of Abkhazia.

At the beginning of August 1808 General Rykgof moved the combined forces of the ruler of Mingrelia and her two brothers-in-law, Manuchar (from Samurzaq'an(o)) and Seferbey Chachba, to Sukhum by order of Count Gudovich. But there succeeded in coming to the aid of Aslanbey in Sukhum his 1st cousin, the commandant of the Poti fortress, Kuchukbey Chachba (nephew of Keleshbey) with an army on 3 ships; by land about 300 Circassians arrived. The military operation, prepared by Rykgof, was not crowned with success. The fortress of Sukhum was not only not captured, but Seferbey returned back to Mingrelia.

As a result, the authority of Aslanbey rose even more. He enjoyed the strong support of the people, the upper strata of Abkhazian society, whilst his standing was high among the numerous offspring of Keleshbey (for example, his brother Hassanbey), which, given the mentality of the Abkhazians, could just not have been the case, had Aslanbey in fact killed his own father. Moreover, Aslanbey, who was married to the Sadzian (Dzhigetian) princess Gjach (Gjachba), enjoyed great respect in the West Abkhazian community of Sadzen and also among the Ubykhs and Adyghes.

In this way the official point of view of the Russian authorities, seeking to defame Aslanbey by charging him with 'parricide', remained only on paper and failed to turn the people away from the legitimate ruler.

It is necessary to note especially that over the course of almost the last two hundred years local historiography has been dominated by only the theme of 'parricide', which was in truth a fabrication of the Russian military and administrators in the years 1808-1810 for specifically political purposes.

At the same time Nina Dadiani, who had in reality poisoned her own husband, was given every conceivable support by the tsarist authorities, who defended her solely because she served the interests of Russia. Moreover, it was with Nina's help that they actively spread the rumours about Aslanbey being the alleged murderer of his father.

But the policy of discreditation had no success. Aslanbey enjoyed unconditional authority in the land also for the reason that Seferbey, who spent most of his time in Mingrelia under the defence of Russian bayonets, continually 'kept asking to be given military forces to take the fortress of Sukhum, since he was left almost completely enfeebled and even in banishment'. The Russian military requested that the Black Sea flotilla be despatched 'to occupy Sukhum, where the parricide Arslan is gaining strength'.

In an atmosphere of total powerlessness the well-known 'pleading points' of Seferbey (baptised Giorgi) also appear on 12th August 1808 in an appeal to the emperor Aleksandr I in connection with the adoption of Abkhazia as a subject of Russia; they were composed in the Georgian language in Mingrelia under the dictation of Nina Dadiani and her confessor, the arch-priest Ioseliani. With rash frankness Seferbey informs the Tsar that all the appeals concerning the amalgamation of Abkhazia with Russia were written by 'Ioann Ioseliani, who with a sincere heart advised me to deliver myself for protection to the Imperial throne'.

It was on the basis of these illegal 'pleading points' that Aleksandr I on 17th February 1810 recognised Giorgi (Seferbey) in his charter 'as the hereditary prince of the Abkhazian domains under the supreme protection, power and defence of the Russian Empire'¹. However, at the moment this charter appeared and for a significant

¹Charter given 17 February 1810 by the Emperor Aleksandr I to the ruler of Abkhazia, Prince Georgij Sharvashidze... We, Aleksandr the First, Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia....Ruler and Sovereign of the Iberian, Kartlian, Georgian and Kabardinian lands...offer Our Imperial grace and favour to the Ruler of the Abkhazian land, Prince Georgij Sharvashidze, Our amiable and true subject. In consideration of your request to enter into permanent subjecthood of the Russian Empire and not doubting your devotion to Our supreme throne as expressed in your letter of commitment despatched in Our Royal Name, we confirm and recognise you, Our loyal subject, as the hereditary Prince of the Abkhazian domains under the protection, power and defence

time thereafter Seferbey was living without interruption in the Russian province of Mingrelia and had no influence at all over Abkhazian affairs, which already for about two years had been governed by its legitimate ruler, Aslanbey.

Seferbey himself, via the Mingrelian cleric I. Ioseliani, several times appealed to St. Petersburg as he impatiently awaited both 'royal charters and a landing-force from the Crimea for the subjugation of Sukhum-Kalë'.

But the unexpected happened. When in June 1810 Colonel Simonovich notified Seferbey in Kutaisi in the presence of the Mingrelian ruler Nina of the despatch of the charter and other royal decorations and requested 'that he immediately set out for Abkhazia to receive them with necessary ceremonial', Seferbey refused point-blank. He began to explain to Simonovich that 'it was exceedingly dangerous for him to receive them at the present time when his brother and rival commands Sukhum and thus virtually the whole of Abkhazia and that he [Aslanbey], hearing of his confirmation as ruler, when having been himself confirmed by the Porte, would assuredly attack him with Turkish forces, destroy and expel them all from Abkhazia'. Completely powerless, Seferbey asked for an adjournment of the ceremony 'until such a time as Russian forces would reach Sukhum, and then with its subjugation under the power of his people he might be able to accept the marks of the All-gracious benevolence towards him'.

General Tormasov 'never expected' such a turn of events and was simply furious. He did not imagine that the new 'legitimate ruler of all Abkhazia would be so impotent in the territory now assigned to his governance or that he would even fear to receive the royal charter of confirmation and the other signs of distinction and be unable to journey to his own home in Abkhazia through dread of his own brother...'. Furthermore, Seferbey actually appealed in person by letter to Gen. Tormasov, requesting the help of Russian troops 'without whom he could not even travel out of Mingrelia to his own domain'. The Russian military administration found itself in a difficult position, but it was by now unable to refuse protection to Seferbey, since the charter of Aleksandr I had been signed. Gen. Tormasov in his own instruction to Simonovich of 15th June 1810 noted that 'there now remained no alternative for maintaining him other than to subjugate the fortress of Sukhum through force of arms and that by this means they should carry Sefer-Ali-bey into power over Abkhazia'. In this very epistle he shews interest in the details of the situation obtaining in Abkhazia and in the influence of Aslanbey. 'Also give the ruler of Mingrelia, Princess Nina Georgievna, to understand,' wrote Tormasov, 'that the protections and grace shewn by

of the Russian Empire, and incorporating you, your family and all the inhabitants of the Abkhazian domains within the number of Our subjects, we promise you and your descendants Our Imperial grace and favour... [Frontispiece of the collective *History of Abkhazia* (in Russian), Sukhum, 1991].

the Sovereign to Sefer-Ali-bey were consequent upon respect for her family-ties with him and thanks to her representation, and therefore she should with all possible means back him and confirm him as ruler of Abkhazia'.

Thus had the fate of Aslanbey and the fortress of Sukhum-Kalë been predetermined. According to the Russian war-plan, it was envisaged that Sukhum would be stormed by a naval landing and a thrust by land from Mingrelia under the command of Maj-Gen. D. Orbeliani. By this time Russia had already recaptured the Turkish fortress at Poti. It remained to take Sukhum in order to secure control over the east coast of the Black Sea. In March 1810 Admiral Marquis I.I. de-Traverse, who was in charge of the Ministry of Naval Military Forces, issued an order on the cruising of Russian boats between Anapa and Sukhum, whilst on 10th June Vice-Admiral Jakovlev instructed Rear-Admiral Sarychev to despatch from Sevastopol to Sukhum a squadron composed of: the 60-gun ship 'Varaxiil', the two frigates 'Voin' and 'Nazaret', one advice-boat 'Konstantin', and two gunboats, with a battalion of 4 naval regiments of 640 men under the command of Lieut-Captain Dodt. At 4.00 in the afternoon on 8th July 1810 this military squadron launched its raid on Sukhum; fire was opened on it from the fortress with cannon and guns. The following day the squadron drew closer, and at 3.00 in the afternoon it unleashed a tornado of fire on the fortress from its own artillery. By evening almost the whole of the fortress' artillery had been smashed and the town-buildings demolished. The 7 Turkish boats anchored in the bay were sunk. On the morning of 10th June Dodt disembarked a battalion of naval infantry with 2 cannons under the command of Maj. Konradin. However, it transpired that the landing-party had no storm-ladders. As a result of a 2-hour bombardment by land and from sea the gates collapsed, and the Russian troops occupied the fortress. From the direction of the River K'odor a company of the Belevian regiment entered the town with two guns, headed by Gen. D. Orbeliani, who had replaced the deceased Gen. Rykgof in the spring of 1809, and Russia's henchman, Seferbey. Aslanbey was compelled to secrete himself amongst his relatives in the Abkhazian community of Sadzen. In the fortress, according to the testimony of Lieut-Capt. Dodt, 300 Abkhazians and Turks had been killed and 75 persons taken prisoner. The Russian landing-party lost 109 officers and men either dead or wounded. Dodt captured 62 cannons, 1,080 puds of gunpowder and much shot.

That same year upto 5,000 Abkhazians were resettled to Turkey. This was the first wave of Abkhazian emigration in the XIXth century.

As we have seen, it is absolutely impossible to describe everything that happened as the 'voluntary unification of Abkhazia with Russia', which has remained the official point of view to the present day. As the documents shew, the circumstances of those

years are not so simple and merit detailed investigation, including study of not only the Russian texts but also of Turkish sources.

The military capture of Sukhum-Kalë was but the first step of tsarism's aggressive policy in Abkhazia. To achieve a position of strength here Russia required a further half-century of war against the Abkhazian people. The struggle between Seferbey and Aslanbey was principally a struggle between two influences: Russian and Turkish, whilst the taking of Sukhum-Kalë was the victory not of Seferbey over Aslanbey but of Russia over Turkey in the battle for Abkhazia.

Seferbey, supported by Russian bayonets, still enjoyed no respect among the people, even though he moved to live in the Sukhum fortress, the only place in Abkhazia where he could feel safe. It was here by order of Tormasov in the autumn of 1810 under the guard of more than 100 Russian soldiers and officers that were conveyed the charter of Aleksandr I and the other signs of distinction that had been kept in the Poti fortress by Col. Merlin. Seferbey received them in Sukhum 'at an assembly' and gave 'publicly before the people an oath of eternal fidelity' to the emperor of Russia, confirming it 'with his own signature and seal'.

However, the military authorities of Russia had an excellent understanding of the weakness of Seferbey and that 'his party is still not terribly strong against his rival' Aslanbey, whose people in December 1810 still controlled even the outskirts of Sukhum despite the presence of 1,000 Russian soldiers. In March 1811 one reads in a document that Seferbey had 'the smallest party', whilst the ruler Nina Dadiani feared an attack on Mingrelia from 'the Abkhazians and mountaineers, who for the most part are followers of Arslanbey'.

After the seizure of Sukhum real power lay in the hands of the military commander of the fortress, Cap. Agarkov, who controlled the actions of Seferbey. In his report to the authorities in January 1811 he speaks unflatteringly of the new ruler, noting that 'the affairs of Abkhazia are in poor order'. Seferbey was in a state of alarm and could not move against Aslanbey's people. As for the Abkhazians, continues Cap. Agarkov, they have reached 'such a pitch of boldness that they come up to the fortress with their weapons, sit around in groups and shoot at the soldiers, with the result that it is dangerous to move 100 paces outside it'.

The whole of Abkhazia was in the grip of the strong emotions of the people. In extreme irritation Gen. Tormasov, the commander of the Russian army in the Caucasus, wrote on 15th March 1811 to Seferbey that he was not taking 'active measures against the party of the parricide...Arslan-bey, which is gradually growing and might gain superiority over us'. Tormasov urged the ruler: 'Strongly affirm your power over the Abkhazian people'. The general reminded Seferbey: 'You are confirmed the legitimate ruler by force of the arms and protection [of the emperor --

author], have been restored to all your rights and enjoy the backing of the victorious Russian army...!.

By the end of the war the Turks had lost all their bases on the Black Sea littoral of the Caucasus (Anapa, Sudzhuk-Kalë, Sukhum-Kalë, Anaklia, Poti). The international situation dictated the necessity of speedily concluding peace with Turkey. Preparing for the invasion of Russia, Napoleon's half-million strong army was massing on the Visla [Vistula].

In May 1812 The Peace of Bucharest was concluded; according to this, Russia acquired the entire coast of Abkhazia and Mingrelia. In reality the unification with Russia of Western Georgia (Mingrelia, Imereti, Guria) and Abkhazia was firmly guaranteed, and the security of the Crimea was enhanced. Ending the war with Turkey allowed the hastening of the conclusion of the war with Persia (1802-1813). Russia decided also on a grand strategic plan: having secured peace on all its southern borders, it deprived Napoleon of a collaborator in Turkey.

At the moment of Russia's confirmation in Sukhum-Kalë Abkhazia occupied an intermediate position between the democratic, liberal societies of the mountaineers of the North West Caucasus and the feudal system of Georgia. However, in the spirit of its social organisation it was tightly linked with the Ubykh-Circassian world. Eye-witnesses particularly noted that in Abkhazia and its historical region of Samurzaq'an(o) (joined to Russia in 1805) there did not exist feudal property in land and that free commoners (*anxa'j^wy*) made up almost all (three-quarters) of the population of the country. Serfdom here, as such, was unknown. On the other hand, in neighbouring Mingrelia, for example, serfdom was found in its most extreme forms, whilst in central Georgia its formation had already been completed in the XIIth-XIVth centuries. In Abkhazia all categories of peasants were proprietors of land. Such right to land placed the lowest estates beyond dependence on the privileged.

The elements of family-tribal organisation were closely adapted to the system of Abkhazia's 'mountain feudalism'. Demonstrative in this regard is the character of the village-community (Abkhaz *a'kyta*), which was 'the fundamental basis' of Abkhazia's social structure: it united all strata of the population -- the highest and lowest estates were steeped in the practice of the so-called 'milk-kinship' (in Russian *atalychestvo*) of the feudals with the peasants. The children of princes and the nobility, given out to peasant-families for their upbringing, became, as did their parents, close relatives of the latter. In fact, even conflict between the estates was reduced. With respect to this, the Kartvelian historian K'. Mach'avariani observed in 1913: 'Between the highest

and lowest estates in Abkhazia there was not the same antagonism and alienation that existed in Guria, Imereti and Georgia².

Intimately bound up with the concept of the freedom of the individual were the right to change one's place of residence -- 'freedom of resettlement', 'freedom of movement' -- and the particular aspect of the institution of hospitality (*asasd'k'ylara*, where in Abkhaz '*asas* = 'guest', *ad'k'ylara* = 'receive'). Both peasants and feudals could be guests. If, for example, difficulties arose in a peasant's relations with a community (blood-feud, injustice in the people's court, discord with a feudal, etc...), he could without hindrance transfer to another under the protection of a new patron and even keep for himself his land in the community he had abandoned.

In the conditions of land-ownership by farmstead (the *khutor*-system), arable tracts were not the property of the community as a whole but were the family- or homestead-property of the Abkhazians. Only pastures and woods were common to all and open for joint-utilisation. Mutual economic assistance and support facilitated an atmosphere of prosperity and provided the necessary income. Amongst the Abkhazians there was not a single beggar, which speaks of the relative justice of their social system.

True, in Abkhazia there existed an insignificant stratum of domestic slaves, taken, as a rule, as prisoners-of-war in the North Caucasus and in Western Georgia as the result of military raids. However, after 2-3 years the slave was permitted to marry, and his owner, whether feudal or peasant, apportioned him both land and utensils, enabling him to pass into the conditionally dependent lowest category of peasants (*ax^w'j^wy* or '*agyrwa*³).

Great interest attaches to the *azats* or emancipated slaves, who had been liberated from varying peasant-estates and in general with no obligations to fulfil. In Abkhazian society they occupied the position of a sub-estate, since in the view of the Abkhazians each and every section of the people should possess maximal freedom. The emancipated slaves would become priests or teachers of the children of feudals and administered religious cults. In 1869 they numbered 2,200 here.

²Note how even a Kartvelian perceived the western provinces of Guria and Imereti as distinct from Georgia proper as late as 1913 [Editor].

³This word appears in the vocabulary-list appended to his 2-volume 'Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838, 1839' by the English visitor J. S. Bell in 1840 with the meaning 'slave'. It happens to be the Abkhazian ethnonym for 'Mingrelian' (based on the *-gr-* radical element seen in the Mingrelian self-designation *ma-rg-al-i* or the Georgian equivalent *me-gr-el-i*) and this secondary sense is an excellent indication of the status of Mingrelians who found themselves in Abkhazia prior to the influx that began at the close of the 19th century, as described later in this chapter [Editor].

Busying themselves with their rural economy, the Abkhazians took from the land just as much as was essential for life. They lived in perfect harmony with nature. The traditional religion of the Abkhazians, paganism, in no small degree facilitated such a natural relationship.

However, the most honourable occupations were military activity and hunting. A community was reminiscent of a military camp, and it lived in a distinctive 'military readiness'. The main reason for the close unity of all the members of a community was the threat from outside (raids of neighbouring peoples, the selling of prisoners-of-war, hostile relations between communities and privileged families, cattle-rustling, etc...), which bonded yet more strongly the highest estates with the lowest within the union of society.

The peasants vigilantly defended popular custom from any encroachments on the part of the highest estates and constituted the fundamental moral pivot of the Abkhazian community. The peasant was the very symbol of a free man. There are well-known cases when some of them renounced aristocratic titles and boasted of their 'pure' peasant origin.

As for the economy of the Abkhazians at this period, it had the character of natural consumption. Abkhazians occupied themselves with the working of metals, skins, wood, pottery and saddle-making, weaving and the preparation of gunpowder. However, this production of home-industry and rural domestic trade was not sold but bartered. Abkhazians felt hostility towards any kind of manifestation of commercial-financial relations. Trade in Sukhum and the coastal points of Gudauta, Ochamchira, K'elasur, and Gudava was in the hands of Turks, Armenians and Mingrelians, who paid a certain fee for this privilege to the ruler of Abkhazia and other feudals.

During the rule of Seferbey Chachba (1810-1821) central rule was weakened completely. Civil dissensions blazed up with their former fury. Endowed with all the rights of a governing authority, Seferbey may have been the formal ruler but could not in any significant way influence the political situation within the country. The free communities of the Abkhazian mountain-regions (PshWy, Ajbga, Dal, Ts'abal, etc...) remained independent as before, 'denying that they were subordinate' to Russia and its ruler.

As before the people deemed Aslanbey to be the real ruler of Abkhazia. From time to time he appeared here and raised rebellions. Thus, in July 1813 he was in Abkhazia but was immediately subjected to an attack from a Russian battalion with 2 guns supported by the militia of the ruler of Mingrelia, Levan Dadiani. Only by such means did Seferbey hang on to power. Guarded by Russian soldiers, he lived either in the Sukhum fortress or in Mingrelia, whose rulers backed him in the struggle with Aslanbey. After the death on 7th February 1821 of the ruler Seferbey there broke out

in Abkhazia 'disturbances and uprisings'. Many Abkhazian princes wished to see as ruler Aslanbey or his brother Hassanbey -- by his father he was brother to Seferbey. But Lieut-Gen. Veljaminov, who was replacement at this time for Gen. Ermolov (absent in St. Petersburg), on the advice of the ruler of Mingrelia, Levan Dadiani, declared 'as ruler of Abkhazia' the widow of Seferbey, the Princess Tamar Dadiani (aunt of Levan). To secure Tamar, Veljaminov issued a decree for the arrest of Hassanbey Chachba and his deportation to Siberia. The Abkhazians refused to accept Tamar as ruler of Abkhazia.

In the summer of 1821 Aslanbey returned to his homeland. With the support of his Sadz, Ubykh and Psh^Wy kinsmen, he raised a rebellion, 'seized the whole of Abkhazia' and lay siege to the Sukhum fortress. However, Prince Gorchakov, sent secretly with an army, crushed the rebels. He brought in a new ruler, Dimitrij (Omarbey), the son of Seferbey, and personally took charge of the punitive expedition. On his orders the villages around Sukhum were laid waste and torched. Having lived in Petersburg since childhood as a hostage, Dimitrij had forgotten his native language and customs and enjoyed even less authority than his father, Seferbey. To guard Dimitrij, Gorchakov left in Lykhny 2 companies of the Mingrelian regiment under the command of Maj. Rakotsi. In fear of Aslanbey's followers, Dimitrij lived in Lykhny for about a year as a prisoner-of-war. However, on 16th October 1822, according to the version of his mother, Tamar Dadiani, he was poisoned by one of Aslanbey's men.

Shortly after Dimitrij's death the Emperor on 14th February 1823 bestowed on his brother Mikhail (Khamudbey) the title of ruler of Abkhazia -- he ruled until 1864. The power of the still under-age Mikhail was very weak. In 1824 under the supervision of Aslanbey there again broke out an uprising, which embraced the whole of Abkhazia. More than 12,000 Abkhazians blockaded the Russian garrisons in the Sukhum fortress and the stronghold at Lykhny. Gorchakov issued an order to the commandant of Sukhum, Lieut-Gen. Mikhin, to restore order. With a detachment of 225 bayonet-bearers in May 1824 he carried out a night-attack on one of the Abkhazian villages and burned it down. Outraged at such savagery, the Abkhazian peasants destroyed the detachment and killed Mikhin. The rebellion flared up with renewed vigour. Aslanbey again returned by Turkish ship from Anapa. For one and a half months Russian soldiers defended the Lykhny stronghold, in which the ruler Mikhail was holding up. The situation greatly worried Ermolov. In July 1824 large military forces advanced into Abkhazia -- 2,000 Russian soldiers and 1,300 cavalry from the Mingrelian militia. They were supported from the sea by the frigate 'Speshnyj' with its own artillery. The punitive expedition was commanded by Gorchakov, who suppressed the outburst in August. Aslanbey was again forced to migrate to Turkey.

With the strengthening of tsarism's military presence the power of the ruler Mikhail was strengthened too. From 1830 coastal military strongholds were erected -- Gagra, Pitsunda, Bambora, Mramba (around Ts'ebelda = Ts'abal), Sukhum -- as well as the military posts at Dranda, KW't'ol, and Elyr (Ilor). From the 1830s to the 1860s several punitive expeditions were carried out against the disobedient Abkhazians living in the mountains of Ts'ebelda, Dal, PshWy, and Ajbga, who were taking an active part in the Russian-Caucasian war and supported the anti-Russian movement of Shamil in Daghestan.

Attention was firmly fixed on Abkhazia after the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the subjugation of the Eastern Caucasus, which was completed in August 1859 with the submission of Shamil in the Daghestanian 'aul' (village) of Gunib⁴. The end of Shamil caused an extreme complication of the position of the mountaineers of the North West Caucasus. They found themselves squeezed by Russian armies from both the Black Sea coast and the mountains. Despite being surrounded, the Adyghes, Ubykhs and the West-Abkhazian Sadz communities continued the unequal struggle with tsarism for a further 5 years. The mountaineers were banking on the active military and political support of England, France, and Turkey. However, the governments of these countries had already decided to pin no hope on the Caucasus.

In June 1861, on the initiative of the Ubykhs, a 'mezhlis' (parliament) was constituted not far from Sochi; it was known as 'The Great and Free Assembly'. The Ubykhs, the Circassian Shapsughes and Abadzeks/Abzakhs, and the Abkhazian tribes of Ahchypsy, Ajbga as well as the coastal Sadzians strove to unite the mountain tribes into 'one huge barrage'. A special deputation from the mezhlis, headed by Izmail Barakaj-Ipa Dzapsh, visited a range of European states.

Active participation in the liberation struggle in the West Caucasus was taken by Polish revolutionaries who intended to raise simultaneously an Abkhaz-Circassian and Polish revolt against the Russian empire. Obsessed with this idea was Col. Teofil Lapinskij (1827-1886). At the end of 1862 he visited London at the head of an Abkhaz-Adyghean deputation. The deputation was received by the Prime Minister of England, Lord Palmerston. Lapinskij delivered this short speech in his presence: 'At the present moment the Abkhazians are the sole tribe who are continuing to mount powerful resistance to Russia in the Caucasus. But even they have become exhausted under the weight of the unequal battle and can be expected to hold out in such conditions for at most another three years. Then they will inevitably follow in the tracks of the other Caucasian tribes: they will move to Turkey. Europe ought, with a

⁴Britain actually had a Vice-Consul, Charles Hamer Dickson, in Sukhum from 12th January 1858 to 25th March 1865, followed by an acting Vice-Consul until consular presence ended on 2nd November 1866 -- information supplied by Peter Roland, formerly of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Research Department [Editor].

view to weakening the northern colossus and keeping its army somehow occupied in the south, when a serious blow is also struck from the opposing side, to support the valiant Abkhazians, forestall their banishment from their native soil and thus save perhaps all the mountain-peoples of the area. To whom if not England, the principal naval power in the world, should this noble and strategic initiative belong in this case?'

Palmerston refused any kind of assistance: 'You are quite correct, Colonel, in your assessment of the Caucasus: tribe after tribe there is succumbing to the energetic pressure of Russia. All our ambassadors and consuls in the East have been informing me of this for some forty years. Where is the wisdom in the Abkhazians now doing the very same?'

The deputation set sail from the shores of England with nothing.

Lapinskij foresaw the speedy abolition of the Abkhazian principedom. Those in Mingrelia and Svanetia had already been abolished by this time, as had at an even earlier stage the Imeretian kingdom and the Gurian principedom.

In May 1864 Russia brought the Caucasian War to an end with a victory parade of its forces in Krasnaja Poljana ('Red Glade' = Abkhaz *G^wbaa D^wy* 'Field of the Gubaas') in the upper reaches of the R. M(d)zymta. The final opposition to the tsarist army in the Caucasus turned out to be the West Abkhazian society of the mountain Sadzians and the unsubjected communities of Psh^wy (upper reaches of the R. Bzyp) and Ajbga (between the R. Psou and the R. Bzyp, beyond the upper reaches of the R. Hashpsy).

Georgian militias too participated in the defeat of the last centres of opposition in the Caucasus and celebrated the triumph along with the Russian army at Krasnaja Poljana on 21st May 1864.

Literally one month after the ending of the war, in June 1864, tsarism abolished the autonomous Abkhazian principedom. Abkhazia was reorganised into the Sukhum Military Sector (the Sukhum District from 1883) of the Russian Empire.

The Viceroy in the Caucasus, Mikhail Romanov, presented a plan for the colonisation of the eastern coast of the Black Sea. Aleksandr II approved the proposed plan to settle the territory from the mouth of the Kuban to the Ingur with Cossacks.

The Ubykhs and the Abkhazian mountain-communities found themselves in a most grievous position. The tsarist authorities demanded of them that they abandon their native plots. The Ubykhs resettled to Turkey in virtually their entirety (45,000), as did the Sadzians (20,000). In 1864 upto 5,000 persons abandoned just the community of Psh^wy.

That the autonomous Abkhazian principedom lasted for so long is explained by the fact that the ruler Mikhail possessed in latter years a great influence over the

mountaineers of the North West Caucasus. Thus, he encouraged in every way the struggle of the Ubykhs with the tsarist forces and introduced a food-tax to help the Ubykhs that was obligatory for everyone in Abkhazia. At the start of his rule he was inclined to be pro-Russian, but from the 1850s he began to cleave towards Turkey.

We read in numerous documents of 'the autonomy of Abkhazia' and 'the autonomous government of the ruler' for the years 1810 to 1864.

The last ruler of Abkhazia, Mikhail, was arrested in November 1864 and resettled by the Russian forces to Voronezh, where he passed away in April 1866. A few months after his death in Russia, a rebellion broke out in Abkhazia. It began on 26th July 1866 at a popular meeting numbering 7,000 in the village of Lykhny. On this day the rebellious Abkhazians killed the head of the Sukhum Military Sector, Col. Kon'jar, the officials Cherepov and Izmajlov, 4 officers and 54 Cossacks⁵. The uprising promptly spread from the village of K'aldakh^Wara to Dal and Sukhum. Upto 20,000 persons took part in it.

The main reason for the discontent was the preparation for the carrying out here of peasant-reform. A participant in these events, the son of the last ruler Mikhail, Prince Giorgi, wrote with regard to it: 'The public declaration of the manifesto concerning serfdom, which did not exist among this people and was consequently inapplicable to them, was an utterly unforgivable error on the part of members of the administration... The people could in no wise understand from whom or what they were going to be liberated'.

The administration's main mistake consisted of the fact that it did not deign to take note of the local particularities of this tiny country, the internal life of which, differently from Russia, Georgia and neighbouring Mingrelia, was free of serfdom. At the meeting in Lykhny the representatives of tsarist authority declared in a most rude fashion that the people would be freed from their master for a certain ransom. The peasants, deeming themselves to be already free, were perturbed, but the princes and nobles were insulted that they, it appeared, were 'ruling' not free people but 'slaves', with whom they had the most intimate bonds of milk-kinship.

News of this movement stirred up the entire Caucasus, especially the Kabardians, who announced to the authorities that 'they themselves would follow the Abkhazians', i.e. rebel.

At the very height of the uprising on 29th July 1866 the rebels proclaimed the 20 year-old Giorgi Chachba as ruler of Abkhazia. However, the attempt to restore the principedom was not crowned with success. The uprising was put down by military

⁵For an Englishman's almost contemporary account see Palgrave (1872.250-270) [Editor].

force under the command of Governor-General of Kutaisi, Svjatopolk-Mirskij, and Prince Giorgi was expelled to 'the army of the Orenburg Military District'.

Following the uprising a wave of repression descended upon Abkhazia. Part of the movement's leadership was executed; many prominent Abkhazians, including 100 year-old elders, were transported to central Russia and Siberia. But the most tragic consequence was the forced resettlement of Abkhazians to Turkey, an event well-known among the people under the name *amha'dJyrra* (exile). From April to June 1867 almost 20,000 persons became *maxadzhirs* (exiles), the Abkhazian population vacating in its entirety the Dal valley and Ts'ebelda. Tsarism had a need of Abkhazia devoid of Abkhazians and insurgents, whilst Turkey had need of a warrior-people.

Strengthening of the Russian colonial yoke led in 1877 to a new insurrection in Abkhazia. As is well-known, it erupted not only here but also in the North Caucasus. These movements were evidently closely linked with events in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. In May 1877 a Turkish squadron subjected Sukhum to bombardment and then landed a party which was composed basically of Abkhazian *maxadzhirs*. However, in August the Russian army retook the town.

The coming out of the Abkhazian population on the side of Turkey brought in its wake more serious political repressions than in 1866. For participation in this insurrection virtually the entire Abkhazian population was declared to be 'guilty' (this stigma remained attached to them from 1877 to 1907). Abkhazians, with the exception of a few representatives of the highest estates, were forbidden to settle along the coast or to reside in Sukhum, Gudauta and Ochamchira. Col. Arakin proposed even 'to group' the population, destroying the farmstead-character of the Abkhazians' dwelling-pattern (the *khutor*-system).

Active expulsion of rebels to the interior *gubernias* of the Russian Empire went on from 1877 to 1890. The policy of repression and colonisation led to a powerful new wave of enforced resettlement of Abkhazians to Turkey. Upto 50,000 persons were compelled in 1877 to abandon the homeland. Central Abkhazia from the R. K'odor upto the R. Psyrtskha was almost completely depopulated. Only one region remained untouched -- the territory of Samurzaq'an(o), since it was solidly defended by Russian forces.

Upto the tragic events of 1877 Abkhazia consisted almost exclusively of its indigenous Abkhazian population. In a short span of years it was converted into a territorial patchwork in terms of its ethnic makeup. The Georgian social activist A. Dzhugheli in the newspaper *droeba* (Time-being) of 1883 wrote in this regard: 'After the latest war there was a decree that the Abkhazians were not to settle in places ranged between the rivers K'odor and Psyrtskha. Permission to settle here was granted to all but them'.

Since 1864, after the abrogation of the Abkhazian principedom and the introduction of direct Russian governance, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Russians, Estonians, Germans and others, but most of all Mingrelians, had established their own villages here.

At the end of the 1860s and the start of the 1870s there appear on the pages of Georgian periodical publications articles in which eminent representatives of the intelligentsia of Georgia incited their own people to assimilate Abkhazian lands denuded as a result of the exile. In these publications it is baldly stated that only Mingrelians, by right of being the neighbouring peoples, should colonise the territory of Abkhazia. And not only Abkhazia -- Georgian writers remarked: 'The whole Caucasus is our land, our country'. In 1873 Giorgi Ts'ereteli urged the Georgians to occupy the whole coast of the Black Sea as far as the Crimea, to which 'foreigners have attached themselves like leeches: Greeks, Tatars, Jews, and others'. It is at this period that in Georgia there starts to take shape an imperial consciousness, and the dangerous conviction becomes implanted in the minds of the Georgians of their exclusivity and special role in the Caucasus.

The first programmatic work in which one reads the suggestion that Abkhazia be colonised by Mingrelians was, if you please, the extensive article by the famous Georgian social activist and publicist, Iak'ob Gogebashvili; it is well-known under the title 'Who should be settled in Abkhazia?'. It was printed in the newspaper 'Tiflis Herald' in 1877⁶ at the time of Russia's war with Turkey. In September to November 1877, when the Abkhazians were bleeding profusely and forced in masses to leave their homeland, Gogebashvili demonstrated all the advantages of the colonisation⁷ of Abkhazia by Mingrelians. 'Mingrelians should be the first to deputise for the exiled Abkhazians,' remarked the publicist.

Into central Abkhazia there gushed a torrent of 'safe' peoples. Amongst their number there were from the very start Mingrelians who settled together with Russians, Armenians and Greeks around Sukhum.

The Mingrelians (and Georgians), playing in Abkhazia the role that the Cossacks traditionally played as spearheads for Russia's imperial expansion in the North Caucasus, found themselves then in a privileged position thanks to their participation on the side of tsarist Russia in the war against the peoples of the Caucasus (1817-

⁶Republished in volume I of his collected works in 1952, pp.90-120, and again in volume 1 of a 5-volume collection of his writings from 1989, pp.366-399.

⁷As Hewitt (1993b.319.Ft.52) noted: 'The 1952 editors felt it necessary to gloss this term on p.93 thus: "Gogebashvili here and below uses the word *coloniser* not in its modern sense but to mean the persons settled there". Obviously they sensed some discomfort over one of the leading Georgians of the 1870s describing Kartvelian settlers on territory that had been by 1952 long and strenuously argued to be Georgian soil as *colonisers*!'.

1864), including the Abkhazians. Distinguished representatives of the Tiflis intelligentsia, who had received their education at Russian universities, unceasingly tried to persuade the government of Russia of the advantage and success that would accrue from conducting the colonisation of Abkhazia only with Mingrelians (and Georgians). For the sake of achieving this main goal of theirs they kept on expressing their feelings of loyal fidelity to the emperors of Russia, striving to gain from them the right to exclusive power over Abkhazia and its lands. Thus, Gogebashvili wrote: 'In a political sense the Mingrelians are just as Russian as Muscovites, and in this way they can exercise influence over the tribe geographically closest to them...'

Without the slightest doubt one can say that it was the dependent territory of Georgia which gained the fullest measure of advantage from the fruits of the Russian military victory in Abkhazia in the XIXth century. The temptation to take control of an Abkhazia that was being bled dry was so great that Gogebashvili in an appeal to the Russian authorities had recourse to the following formula: 'The colonisation of Abkhazia by Mingrelians is a matter of state-importance'.

As a result, a mass of landless peasants from Western Georgia were planted in central Abkhazia, in the depopulated villages of Merkheul⁸ (1879), Besletka (1881), Akapa (1882), K'elasur and Pshap (1883). In this way the ethno-demographic situation within Abkhazia during the post-war period altered radically, as explained in Chapter 15.

At this period the Georgian clergy unleashed a storm of activity, foisting on the autochthonous Abkhazian population a Georgian liturgy and the Georgian language, with which they were totally unfamiliar, whilst many Abkhazian surnames were registered by Mingrelian clerics in a Kartvelian form⁹.

In the final decade of the XIXth century and at the start of the XXth because of the endless flow of those resettled from Western Georgia, relations between Abkhazians and Kartvelians were becoming ever more complicated, reaching their lowest point during the revolutionary developments of 1905.

The Abkhazian peasant, who lived in a world of patriarchal traditions, did not understand marxism, the ideology of the working class, and social-democratic doctrine. Differently from other peoples with an orientation for commercial-financial relations, Abkhazians were not concerned with trade, seasonal work or working as day-labourers, considering such occupations 'ignominious'. They still preserved many characteristics inherent in the psychology of a warrior-people. In 1906 one of the

⁸Birthplace in 1899 of Beria [Editor].

⁹Abkhazian surnames are typically rendered with the ending -ba (cf. *iy-'pa* 'his son' vs *iy-'pha* 'his daughter'), whilst Mingrelian endings are typically -ia, -ua, -ava, -aia, and Georgian names usually end in -shvili or -dze; Svan endings are -(i)ani [Editor].

leading newspapers 'Outskirts of Russia' stressed: 'Socialism has not yet taken root among the Abkhazians, and so one can live with them'.

The Abkhazian peasantry interpreted the events of the Russian revolution of 1905 in Abkhazia as a 'Georgian' revolution and viewed with distrust those who had so recently occupied the lands of their fellows and exiles and now appeared before them in the role of revolutionary agitators.

With the aim of 'preserving the Sukhum District', the champions of the official politics right on the eve of the revolution strengthened measures 'against the influx into it of Mingrelians' who 'are enslaving the area in terms of its economic relations'. Such was the opinion of Governor-General of Kutaisi, Gershel'man, which he expressed to Nicholas II in 1900.

Those who had originally inspired the colonial doctrine, meeting in the shape of the transplanted Kartvelians a barrier on the path of widening their influence in Abkhazia, fashioned for them 'special rules': they limited their permits to Sukhum, Gudauta, and Ochamchira and made the procedure for acquiring real-estate more difficult. All of this caused extreme annoyance among those resettled from Western Georgia, who were the fundamental motive force of the revolution. They controlled the land by right of tenant, basically around Sukhum and in the Samurzaq'an(o) province, having quickly settled both places on the roads and different coastal points associated with vibrant trade. It was in just these regions that the 'revolutionary movement' appeared strongest.

The tsarist administration in the Caucasus, stirring up inter-nation discord in the spirit of the policy of *Divide et impera*, with all its might sought to take advantage in its own interests of the lack of trust and the tension that had set in to complicate Abkhaz-Kartvelian relations in 1905-1907. In 1907 the Petersburg newspaper 'New Time' observed: 'Instead of a feeling of gratitude towards the Abkhazian population, amongst whom Kartvelian nationalists are living, there is brazen-faced exploitation... This accounts for the hatred the Abkhazians have for their economic and future political enslavers... Can we permit the Abkhazian people to be gobbled up by Kartvelian immigrants?... Is it not time to wake up? The tolerance of the Abkhazians might dry up. One Armeno-Tatar [Azerbaijani -- author] conflict in the Caucasus is enough -- why do we need to create another Kartvelian-Abkhazian one!'

At that time the little book 'Abkhazia is not Georgia' saw the light of day.

After three decades Nicholas II on 27th April 1907 signed a proclamation on the remission of the charge of 'culpability' against the Abkhazian people, in which was noted their loyalty to the government in the course of the revolution; especially stressed was the fact that 'in the troubled times of 1905 the Abkhazian emerged from the experience with honour'.

From the end of the XIXth century the tsarist regime began to implement a new policy in regard to the Abkhazians. The politics of the 'cudgel', so characteristic for the period 1810-1880, changed into the politics of the 'cake'. The authorities came to the conclusion that in place of the Russian colonisation planned in Abkhazia there had taken place a mass-Kartvelian settlement, whose representatives speedily appropriated into their own hands the economic levers in the region¹⁰. But organised administrative-political measures had not produced the desired results.

The fundamental danger to its interests was seen by tsarism in the raging activity of the Georgian church in its efforts to spread its own influence over the Abkhazian population. Because of this, by decision of the Synod, the Commission for the Translation of Religious Books into Abkhaz was founded (1892). A group of Abkhazian clerics and teachers starts to take shape from precisely this time.

In 1907 ceremonial worship in the Abkhaz language took place in the ancient cathedrals at Lykhny and Myk^W. The fact was that the Russian government was seeking under the cloak of church-reform to carry out one of administration. The essence of it was that the frontiers of the Sukhum eparchate (incorporating within itself the whole territory of the Sukhum District, the Black Sea Gubernia, the town of Anapa and part of the Zugdidi Region [= *uezd*]) was considerably more extensive than the frontiers of the Sukhum District (from 1883), but according to the makeup of the population Russians were in a significant preponderance. In connection with this situation, the Bishop of Sukhum in 1901 proposed to the Petersburg Synod a project to split his eparchate from the Georgian exarchate. However, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and the spreading revolutions hindered the implementation of this decision. The plan to divide off the eparchate as an independent one was raised several times in the years 1907-1908, and again 1912-1915. It is obvious that such independence for the eparchate would have isolated the Sukhum District as well, protecting it from Georgian influence. The first step towards these goals was taken by Prince A. Oldenburgskij (relative of Nicholas II), who constructed in Gagra a beautiful weather-station (1901-1903) and in 1904 split off Gagra and its environs from the constituency of the Sukhum District, annexing the said territory (from the R. Bzyp) to the Black Sea Gubernia. Later, in February 1914, the question of

¹⁰These Russian attempts to counter the unfortunate and unforeseen results of their colonial policy in Abkhazia are typically glossed today by Kartvelian commentators in words similar to the following by Georgian geographer, Revaz Gachechiladze: 'A definite increase in Georgian national self-awareness and the rapid integration of the different Georgian sub[-]ethnic groups into one nation occurred in the second half of the 19th century. **This made the imperial government rather suspicious and as a counter[-]measure Abkhazian nationalism was encouraged on the eve of the 20th century and deliberately directed in an anti-Georgian way**' (1996.32) [Editor -- stresses added].

transforming the Sukhum District into an independent *gubernia* was raised before the Caucasian viceroy. The First World War again prevented the realisation of this reform.

It is hardly surprising that in the wake of the February revolution in Russia the question of the autocephaly of the Abkhazian church was decided in Sukhum in May 1917 at an assembly of the clergy and voting laymen of the Abkhazian Orthodox population. The assembly appealed to the Synod and the transitional Russian government, however the autocephaly of the Abkhazian church, proclaimed in May, took no further shape.

During the years 1910 to 1917 there was a rapid growth in Abkhazian socio-political thinking. The major role in the awakening of national self-awareness among the Abkhazians was played by the native intelligentsia.