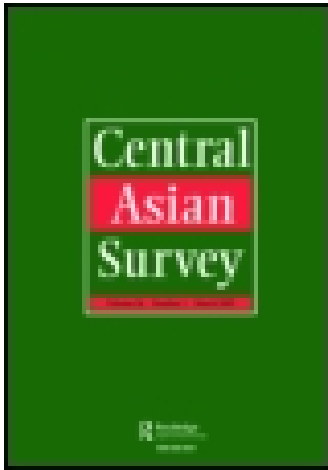


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Edge of empires. A history of Georgia

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BOOK REVIEW

Edge of empires. A history of Georgia, by Donald Rayfield, London, Reaktion, 2012, 479 pp., £35.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-78023-030-6

In criticizing Ronald Suny (1989), Donald Rayfield offered his own template for structuring a history of Georgia. He thought it should begin (1990, 353)

with the connections of the Georgians with ancient Anatolia, the presumed Indo-Europeans and Semites of the upper Euphrates, as well as the autochthonous Caucasians, and then went on to deal with the Kartvelian peoples (the Svans, Laz, Mingrelians and Georgians), moving into recorded history to discuss the effects of Greeks, Iranians, Mongols, Turks, and Russians on Georgia's genetic stock, language, culture, sense of identity, finally examining the relationship of the nation to the state, its own and its oppressors' and protectors', concluding with an examination of the very disturbing resurgence of Georgian nationalism, even chauvinism, and some relevant predictions.

Rayfield judged Suny's monograph deficient in its over-concentration on Russo-Georgian relations and concluded (1990, 354): 'A book still needs to be written on the unfinished making of the Georgian nation; Suny's work gives us some leads and some material, but will be remembered only as a precursor.' Deploying his considerable linguistic skills, Rayfield consulted multilingual sources in seeking to realize his own prescription. The result rebalances Suny's contribution, for 305 pages are required to reach 1885, leaving only 95 pages to cover the remaining period (up to the pre-parliamentary election 2012). Thus, the present, basically chronological account, unencumbered with theoretical distractions, is a welcome attempt to present a more fulsome picture, as it guides readers through the often-gory minutiae of the interaction between the Kartvelians and their various would-be or actual hegemon across the centuries. Access to previously closed archives enabled augmentation of the story.

Since unity has hardly been the typical state of the landmass whose history is here described (historically Georgian-speaking provinces of T'ao, K'lardzheti and Shavsheti, plus the homeland of the vast majority of the Kartvelian Laz people lie in modern-day Turkey), the narrative frequently switches from one region to another and then perhaps to a third or back to the first. To prevent readers losing the thread, subheadings appropriately interspersed would have facilitated both geographical and temporal orientation.

Many of Rayfield's assertions are not sourced, but anyone happening to know where to look can demonstrate that, unfortunately, not all the relevant pronouncements are accurate. Also, more rigorous research into some topics, especially for the last quarter-century, might have reduced the number of factual errors. The problems fall into two general categories: (1) the ethnic identity of the residents of north-west Transcaucasia in ancient times and the associated over-importance then assigned to the Svans; and (2) a series of worrying mistakes relating to the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict (especially concentrated on pp. 382–384).

Pace Rayfield, there is no convincing evidence that Svans ever lived on the coast, much less that they once controlled Dioscourias (today's Abkhazian capital Sukhum/Aq^w'a), as claimed on pp. 13 and 28. To identify (without argument) the ancient coastal-dwelling *Sannigs* as Svans (p. 33) is to ignore the more plausible explanation, which derives the term from the Abkhazian Tsan.ba (Tsan.aa) clan. The ethnonym 'Laz' is unhesitatingly linked to an (actually non-existent!) Svan toponym *la-zan* 'country of the Zans', though Rayfield fails to mention both the progenitor of this derivation, Nikolaj Marr, and Marr's later rejection of his own proposal. And finally on

ancient matters, Rayfield is wrong (p. 49) in stating that the Svans revolted against the Byzantines (555–556), slaughtering their general Soterichus, when the historian of these events, Agathias, again unmentioned here, not only lays responsibility on the Missimians but identifies the Missimians linguistically and culturally with the Apsilians (universally accepted to have been ancestors of the Abkhazians).

Historical occupancy of north-west Transcaucasia is highly relevant to the still unresolved Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. Rayfield correctly notes that the presence *-ps-* (from the proto-North West Caucasian root for ‘water’) in several hydronyms of western Transcaucasia testifies to the North West Caucasian peoples having reached their homelands from the south, but he forgets (p. 15) that Abkhaz no longer retains this sequence in its neologism for this lexeme. Although Rayfield rightly covers the souring of relations between Georgians and the country’s ethnic minorities as a result of the dangerous nationalism that infected the majority population from the late 1980s, the errors he makes in reference to Abkhazian affairs can only entrench the wide-scale misunderstanding of the issues engendered by misleading discussion of the region across the media or by a poorly informed commentariat since 1989.

Discussion of Abkhazian themes following Russia’s 1864 conquest of the (North) Caucasus starts badly, for, without citing any source, Rayfield (p. 300) describes Abkhazia as then accommodating 38,000 Abkhazians versus 60,000 Mingrelians. According to specialist demographer Daniel Müller, there is no reliable source for Abkhazia’s population until the 1886 Family Lists, wherein the total population of 68,773 comprised three leading categories individually numbering: 28,323 Abkhazians, 3558 Mingrelians and 30,640 ‘Samurzaq’anoans’ (identifiable at that period as Abkhazians).

Some of the points requiring radical emendation are the following.

Given the statement ‘When Shevardnadze’s interior minister went to Sukhumi to negotiate, he and his entourage were kidnapped’ (p. 383), most readers would probably infer that the kidnapers were Abkhazian, whereas in fact they were Mingrelian supporters of the ousted president (Zviad Gamsakhurdia), whose struggle for his restoration continued after the end of the Abkhazian war.

Rayfield’s account of the start of the war in Abkhazia (p. 383) namely:

On 14 August [... the] Georgians sent marines to seize Gagra and cut off Abkhazia from Russia, and then besieged Sukhumi’s parliament. They withdrew from Sukhumi when their hostages were released, but made General K[’]jit[’] Jovani military commander of the city. The Abkhaz president Ardzinba’s government fled north to the Russian army base at Gudauta and called on the north Caucasian peoples to aid Abkhazia. The response was extraordinary

is faulty for the reasons that: there was no Georgian withdrawal; the Gagra-landing occurred on 15 August; the release of the hostages *by their Mingrelian captors* had no bearing on events in Abkhazia; Ardzinba was then Supreme Soviet Chairman, becoming president only in 1994; the legitimate Abkhazian authorities moved to Gudauta because the Gudauta Region was the only one of Abkhazia’s administrative units where Abkhazians formed an absolute majority and installed themselves in the building of the Gudauta Regional Administration.

The Abkhazians stand accused (p. 384) of a war crime: ‘In villages like Kamani men, women and children were tortured and murdered in cold blood’. The author’s charge seemingly comes straight from Wikipedia (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamani_massacre). Abkhazian eyewitnesses absolutely reject the website’s assertions, dismissing them as one more example of Georgia’s myth-making industry. They maintain that, apart from some old folk sheltering in the monastery, residents had been evacuated prior to the assault, which cost 18 Abkhazian lives, leaving no women and children to be ‘tortured and murdered’.

The same page imputes another war crime: ‘The Abkhaz downed two aircraft carrying refugees.’ Aircraft were indeed destroyed, but the two main incidents (21–22 September) saw a

TU-134 (flying from Sochi) and a TU-154 (flying from Tbilisi) downed while ferrying in fighters. The dead (27 and 108 respectively) were not refugees.

In the context of a group of Chechen mercenaries being contracted in the autumn of 2001 by the Shevardnadze government to be transported across Georgia into Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley, from where they were to launch attacks inside Abkhazia, we read: 'the hard men running Abkhazia were infuriated: there was general mobilization in Abkhazia, and a UN helicopter was shot down on 8 October. Russian aircraft bombed the upper K[']odori valley' (p. 391). A minor quibble would ask for identification of these 'hard men', for, although no longer so regularly seen in public, the ailing Ardzinba was controlling events in the background, while the government was fronted by his wife's cousin, Premier Anri Dzhergenia, lawyer and Abkhazia's one-time Procurator General. But the shooting down of the helicopter with the loss of nine lives (including United Nations personnel) is by far the graver issue. The helicopter was brought down over that part of the valley that was under Georgian control and was thus not an atrocity committed by the Abkhazians, as Rayfield's readers might easily (mis)conclude.

The book's title is well chosen, as readers are given insights into the (often destructive) roles that foreign powers have played on the territory that houses the Georgians and their sister-Kartvelian peoples. Intra-Georgian/Kartvelian relations have also not always been benign, and these too are here fully exposed; the family trees for the various local royal houses appended to the volume provide a useful aid to understanding the nature of dynastic relations and/or manoeuvrings. With such a turbulent past, one can appreciate why there should be a yearning in Georgia to establish closer bonds with Europe, though rabid anti-Russianism, particularly characteristic of the Saak'ashvili era, was (and still is) hardly likely to help foster sensible relations with the country's largest neighbour. One cannot but feel that the Soviet and post-Soviet periods deserved more extensive and considered treatment. Equally, one cannot deny that the regrettable shortcomings highlighted above (plus others for which there is no space to illuminate here) diminish the book's overall value, even for the general reader. The errors, particularly those concerning more recent history, could and should have been avoided with more careful scrutiny of sources and greater attention paid to ensuring accuracy over details. One would hope that a second edition will see the mistakes corrected and all pronouncements appropriately referenced, an essential desideratum for the academic audience.

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