

Abkhazia and Georgia: Time for Reassessment

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Introduction

Much has been written since the summer of 2008 about Russo-Georgian relations and the rights and wrongs of the August fighting that erupted in or around both South Ossetia and, to a lesser extent, Abkhazia. Most commentators (foreign correspondents, media opinion-formers, NATO-spokesmen, politicians) forgot (or chose to ignore) the issues underlying the conflicts in both these long-suffering Transcaucasian regions, preferring to take their cues from Georgia's well-oiled (or, at least, well-financed) spinning machine. The argument has, thus, been that President Dmitry Medvedev and Premier Vladimir Putin have embarked on a mission to revive the Kremlin's imperial ambitions, dormant since the 1991 collapse of the USSR, along the former Soviet periphery, beginning with punishment of Georgia for the avowedly pro-Western stance of its president, Mikheil Saak'ashvili, since his overthrow of Eduard Shevardnadze in November 2003. Thus, it is the larger matter of east-west relations that have tended to be debated, whilst the voices of those trying to argue their respective cases against Tbilisi for some two (if not nine) decades have been drowned out. This article seeks to redress the balance, with special reference to the Abkhazian cause. But first let it be noted that there is absolutely no genetic link between the languages spoken by the Abkhazians and the Georgians: Abkhaz is a North-West Caucasian language related to Circassian and Ubykh (extinct since 1992), whilst Georgian is a South Caucasian (or Kartvelian) language related to Mingrelian, Laz and Svan; Ossetic is an Iranian language.

History

During the roughly seventy years of its existence, the Soviet Union's internal frontiers and administrative structures interested very few in the outside-world. Georgia might have been better known for a time than most of the far-flung republics thanks to its scion Joseph Stalin (the Gori-born Ioseb Besarionis-dze Dzhughashvili), but rare indeed will have been the denizens of Western foreign ministries not thrown into mild panic with Mikhail Gorbachëv's 1985 surprise-appointment of Shevardnadze, Georgia's Party Boss since 1972, as Soviet Foreign Minister, given the obscurity of the man and his country. That country emerged from the ruins of the

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USSR seeking recognition within its Soviet borders, a goal attained in 1992. But, simply because the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic possessed a set of defined frontiers in 1991, it does not follow that at any given moment in history a state, however named, necessarily encompassed all (if not exclusively) the said territory or that those frontiers were justified even within (let alone outside) the Soviet context. This, then, is the first topic for examination.

At its zenith under the legendary Queen Tamar (1184-1213), the mediaeval kingdom of Georgia extended even beyond its Soviet boundaries to include substantial tracts lying today in eastern Turkey, where Georgians (and most Laz) still live, speaking their ancestral tongue(s). The first king of this unified state, Bagrat' III, in 978 inherited from his Abkhazian mother, Gurandukht', the Kingdom of Abkhazia, which included both Abkhazia proper and most of today's west Georgian provinces, which Abkhazian prince Leon II had added to his domains in the late 8th century. By the time of his death in 1014 Bagrat' had inherited all remaining Georgian-speaking regions, and, as his 36-year reign ended, the Georgian chronicler ascribed to him the title *apxazta da kartvelta mepe* 'Sovereign of the Abkhazians and the Georgians'². But this unified polity was due to fragment after the depredations of the Mongols, who first appeared in the Caucasus during the reign of Tamar's daughter Rusudan in the 1240s. On its territory different kingdoms and/or princedoms arose, and Abkhazia (more or less as we understand the geographical reference of this term today) was one such independent princedom under the Chachba family. No state-entity formally styled 'Georgia' re-emerged until the early 20th century.

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

²Volume 1, p. 281 of the Georgian Chronicles (*kartlis tsxovreba*), edited by S. Q'aukhchishvili (1955).

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

As Tsarist Russia pushed south from the late 18th century following 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, resistance grew across virtually the whole North Caucasus. During the 19th-century Caucasian War, the Abkhazians were the only people resident south of the mountains to join it (see Englishman James Stanislaus Bell's account of his 3-year experiences among the fighting communities⁴). Abkhazia had come under Russian 'protection' on 17th February 1810 but continued to administer its own affairs until 1864. This was the year when the Caucasian War ended with the surrender of the North West Caucasian alliance at Krasnaja Poljana, inland from Sochi. Following their defeat, all the Ubykhs plus most Circassians and Abkhazians chose to abandon their ancestral lands to resettle in the Ottoman Empire; thus, most Abkhazians (and Circassians) today live in the Near East, predominantly in Turkey. A further outflow took place after the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War. It was after these migrations, known as *maxadzhirstvo* 'Great Exile', that non-Abkhazians first started to populate the denuded areas, starting with a movement of Svans from Svanetia into the Upper K'odor Valley, supposedly to take care of the Abkhazians' wells until their return. In a series of articles published in *Tiflisskij Vestnik* (1877) the renowned Georgian educationalist Iak'ob Gogebashvili argued that the best 'colonisers' (k'olonizat'orebi) for Abkhazia would be the Mingrelians. These articles were published as a single, 30-page contribution entitled 'Who should be settled in Abkhazia?' (vin unda iknes dasaxlebuli apxazetshi?) in volume 1 of Gogebashvili's collected works in 1952, when Abkhazia was still subject to the repression imposed from 1937 by (Georgian) Stalin and (Mingrelian) Lavrent'i Beria, and so the editors felt it necessary to append a footnote (p.93) to suggest to readers that Gogebashvili was not using the term 'colonisers' in its modern sense⁵! There is a fascinating linguistic clue as to the status of Mingrelians in Abkhazia shortly before the migrations, for in his short list of comparative vocabulary for Abkhaz (styled 'Azra', after its Ubykh designation /azgha/), Ubykh (misnamed 'Abaza'), and Circassian Bell cites the Abkhazian ethnonym /agirwa/ 'Mingrelian'⁶ but assigns it the meaning 'slave'. And, conversely, as an indication of the respect historically shewn amongst Mingrelians to the Abkhazians, we find in Givi Eliava's 1997 Mingrelian-Georgian dictionary⁷ the entry /apxaza/, which is

⁴J.S. Bell *Journal of a residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838, 1839*. 2 vols. London: Edward Moxon.

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

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

⁷See p.21 of Eliava's *megrul-kartuli leksik'oni*, Mart'vili-Tbilisi: Intelekt'i.

glossed 'Abkhazian; metaphorically = elegant; /apxazitsali k'ochi re/ He is an Abkhazian-like/elegant fellow'.

With the departure of at least 120,000 Abkhazians (mostly in the 'maxadzhirstvo') and the start of an inflow of non-Abkhazians, Abkhazian territory was subjected to different administrative divisions and arrangements upto the time of the Russian Revolution (1917). One can legitimately date the start of Abkhazia's grievances against Georgia to the period of turmoil that followed, lasting until Soviet power was established across Transcaucasia (1921). With various groups (e.g. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, White Russians under General A.I. Denikin) jockeying for supremacy at a time when the 1st World War was still in progress and both Turkish and German troops were active in the region, Abkhazia was first allied with the North Caucasian Mountain Peoples' Confederation. Georgia declared independence on 26th May 1918 and on 11th June signed a treaty with Abkhazia. But thereafter, by a mixture of political manipulation and force of arms under General G.I. Mazniev (Mazniashvili)⁸, Georgia brought Abkhazia within its orbit. The Menshevik constitution of 1921 mentioned Abkhazia as an autonomy within Georgia without specifying the nature of any state-legal relations between autonomies and the centre, but, before promulgation, the government collapsed as the Red Army took control.

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

After the poisoning of Abkhazia's leader Nest'or Lak'oba in 1936 by (Abkhazian-born) Beria in Tbilisi, Abkhazia's intelligentsia were targetted in The Terror, but additional anti-Abkhazian measures were instituted by Beria in 1937 and, when he was elevated to become Stalin's chief of the secret police in 1938, continued

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

under the direction of his successor in Tbilisi, the Svan K'andid Chark'viani (father of the current Georgian ambassador to London). The Abkhazian script (like that of Ossetian in SOUTH Ossetia only) was shifted to a Georgian base; large numbers of mainly Mingrelians were transplanted into Abkhazia, effectively accomplishing Gogebashvili's 1877 recommendation, to help alter the demographic balance in favour of the Georgians (for from c.1930 Mingrelians, along with Svans and Laz, became officially categorised as 'Georgians')⁹; Abkhazian language-schools were closed in 1945-46 and replaced by Georgian language-schools; expert on Georgian literature [sic] P'avle Ingoroq'va (1893-1990) fabricated the absurd theory, published first in the journal *mnatobi* 'Luminary' (1949-51) and later as part of his monumental work *giorgi merchule* 'Giorgi Merchule' (1954), that 'today's' Abkhazians migrated to Abkhazia from the North Caucasus only in the 17th century, replacing and taking the name of history's 'true' Abkhazians, who were a Georgian tribe — *ergo*, Abkhazia is Georgian territory; in the late 1940s broadcasting and publishing in Abkhaz essentially ceased, and the Abkhazians just escaped transportation to Central Asia, a fate which actually befell Abkhazia's Greek community — it was felt that, given the other measures implemented, the Abkhazians would be mingrelianised/georgianised within generations¹⁰.

Though the anti-Abkhazian policies were put into reverse after the deaths of Stalin and Beria (1953), the Abkhazians continued periodically to air their objections to domination by Tbilisi. After widescale action in 1978, including a letter to the Kremlin from 130 intellectuals (who subsequently lost their jobs) demanding the transfer of Abkhazia from Georgia to the Russian Federation, Moscow was so worried that Shevardnadze was ordered to visit Abkhazia's capital Aq^W'a (conventionally known as Sukhum) to calm tempers. Abkhazia remained within Georgia, but one positive result was that Aq^W'a replaced the previously designated city of Batumi as home to Georgia's second-only university (with Abkhazian, Russian and Georgian sectors). In light of this history, it was understandable that ten years later under Gorbachëv's *glasnost*'-policy the Abkhazians would once more air their long-held grievances, which they did in the 'Abkhazian Letter', sent to Moscow in June 1988. It is unclear when knowledge of this document filtered through to Tbilisi. But, before it could, Georgians had already from late 1988 succumbed with relish to the destructive nationalist calls of such anti-communist leaders, as the late Merab

⁹Archival accounts of these forced population-movements were collected and published in 'Abkhazia: Documents Bear Witness 1937-1953' (in Russian, Sukhum, 1992) by B. Sagarija, T. Achugba and V. Pachulija.

¹⁰The 'Father of Abkhazian Literature', Dyrmit' G^Wylia, who in 1925 had written the first history of Abkhazia, was forced, in true Stalinist fashion, to recant the views expressed therein which were not in line with the new orthodoxy on the history of 'Western Georgia'; see his 1951 pamphlet 'On my book "The History of Abkhazia"' (in Russian).

K'ost'ava, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the late Gia Ch'ant'uria; much of their (and others') rhetoric was directed not only externally towards Russia but internally towards the republic's minorities, particular venom being reserved for the Abkhazians (and S. Ossetians), with disturbing attempts to revive Ingoroq'va's hypothesis and rehabilitate its author, who lived out the last decades of his long life in deserved academic purdah¹¹. Such rallying-cries as 'Georgia for the Georgians!' signalled the dangers the minorities would face in an independent Georgia; in 1989 'Georgians' (inflated by Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz numbers) represented only 70.1% of Georgia's population, whilst the Abkhazians had been reduced to a 17.8% minority in their homeland¹². In defence of their ethno-regional interests against the exclusivist-chauvinist threats emanating from Tbilisi, the Abkhazians responded by establishing a national forum Aydgylara 'Unity' (paralleled by S. Ossetia's Adæmon Nykhas), whose policies threatened none of Abkhazia's non-Abkhazian denizens. The consequence of the attempt, promoted by the nationalist oppositionists, unconstitutionally to open a branch of Tbilisi State University in Aq^W'a to satisfy 'Georgian' higher educational requirements were fatal clashes in Abkhazia over the weekend of 15-16th July 1989. Thus was the foundation laid for a course of events that would lead to full-scale war three years later.

Politics

Mingrelian Zviad Gamsakhurdia became Georgia's first post-communist president in October 1990. On 17th March 1991, Abkhazia, unlike Georgia proper, participated in Gorbachëv's referendum on preserving the USSR, and an absolute majority of the electorate (thus including non-Abkhazian voters) voted in favour. Continuing to work within the only constitutional framework then available, the Abkhazians, under Vladislav Ardzinba's leadership, hoped to achieve a bicameral system of government in negotiations with Gamsakhurdia. But in 1991 Tbilisi imposed a single-chamber format, which quickly led to stalemate and a Kartvelian boycott.

The USSR disintegrated in December. Having revealed his inadequacies as leader and failed to achieve recognition for Georgia, Gamsakhurdia was ousted at the end of January 1992, sparking a civil war, concentrated in Gamsakhurdia's power-

¹¹Sadly, these attempts have proved alarmingly successful, being taken up in various forms by linguists and historians who, regardless of any damage to their own reputations, do immense harm to their nation's cause by sowing seeds of hatred among knew generations seduced by such myths. A recent collective-work which falls into this category is the 377-page *nark'vevebi sakartvelos ist'oriidan: apxazeti* 'Essays from the History of Georgia: Abkhazia' edited by Dzhemal Gamaxaria et al. (Tbilisi, 2007). On the power of myth in this and other Transcaucasian hot-spots see Victor Shnirelman *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka, 2001).

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

base of Mingrelia. Realising that change was necessary for Georgia to win acceptance into the world-community, the putchists invited Shevardnadze to abandon his Moscow retirement and lead them. For Georgia, this was a brilliant move, but it was ultimately to have traumatic consequences for Abkhazia (and S. Ossetia), for, within days of Shevardnadze's return in March, the EU (the UK leading the pack) and USA not only recognised but established diplomatic relations with Georgia.

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

In a sense, then, it was only a matter of time before Georgia's Soviet borders gained the stamp of international approval, but, with the 2 year-old war in S. Ossetia that Gamsakhurdia had instigated in 1990 still in progress, fierce resistance still raging in Mingrelia against Georgia's unelected State Council, and tensions rising daily in Abkhazia, recognition, followed swiftly by the gifting to Georgia of membership of the IMF, World Bank and, finally, the UN, was both premature and irresponsible — elections were scheduled for 11th October; why not wait until Shevardnadze legitimised his position, promising these boons on condition that the civil war be ended (a ceasefire had been achieved in S. Ossetia in June) and that the Abkhazian question be resolved peacefully? The only explanation can have been the Shevardnadze factor, with diplomats, possessing little or no knowledge of Georgia's internal complexities, undoubtedly advising their political masters to do Georgia's new leader a favour for his perceived role in bringing down the Berlin Wall; the

advice was taken, with little thought for the consequences. Within weeks of Georgia's admission to the UN, Shevardnadze sent his troops into Abkhazia on 14th August 1992...

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

The Shevardnadze factor surfaced again during the autumn-elections, when he claimed a popular mandate as State Council Chairman. One of the US observers, Gregory Minjack, who was assigned to Gori and environs (extending into S. Ossetia!), reports: 'Of course, that election was white-washed even with ample evidence of electoral curiosities which would never be tolerated in other emerging democracies' (personal communication).

Despite facing two clearly articulated threats of genocide¹³ and actually losing 4% of their numbers during the 14-month war, the Abkhazians and their allies from the diaspora and North Caucasus expelled Georgia's assortment of fighters, ending the war on 30th September 1993. Abkhazians advanced across the Ingur-border upto

¹³The first came on 25th August 1992 when the head of Georgian fighters, Gia Q'arq'arashvili, stated on TV that he would sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to wipe out all 97,000 Abkhazians, if that is what was needed to preserve Georgia's borders. The second was published in April 1993 in *Le Monde Diplomatique* when Giorgi Khaindrava, minister for minorities and later chief-negotiator with the Abkhazians, wrote that only ten to fifteen thousand young Abkhazians needed to be killed to destroy their gene-pool, adding: 'We are perfectly capable of doing this'.

the Mingrelian capital, Zugdidi. But, instead of holding it as a bargaining-chip, they returned home, telling the Zviadists under Loti Kobalia, who, like their fellow-Mingrelians in Abkhazia's Gal District, had not supported Shevardnadze's Abkhazian escapade, that they had no irredentist claims against Georgia and were uninterested in the fate of the fleeing government-forces. At this time, the Abkhazians were well-placed to end the Shevardnadze factor once and for all, as they had the Georgian leader surrounded in his Abkhazian bunker. But Ardzinba took Yeltsin's call and agreed to let Shevardnadze leave unharmed — his personal jet still stands at Dranda airport. Had Ardzinba behaved like Yeltsin at the start of the war and declined to pick up the receiver¹⁴, Shevardnadze's (and Georgia's) destiny would have been quite different. However, Shevardnadze's immediate problem was how to stop the advance eastwards out of Mingrelia of the Zviadists, who were pursuing the fleeing troops, capturing village after village. Georgia applied for membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the resulting 'humanitarian' assistance from Russia saw an end to the rebellion. Strangely, no westerners raised a squeak of protest about Russia's presence on Georgia's soil, in contrast to the howls that greeted Russia's response to Georgian aggression in S. Ossetia 15 years later. Again, the Shevardnadze factor was at work.

Peace Accords between 'the sides' (recognition of Abkhazia as equal in status to Georgia) were signed in the spring of 1994 in Moscow, and a force of CIS (essentially Russian) peace-keepers was posted to the demilitarised zone along the Ingur. No-one objected to such responsibility being devolved to the Russians, just as there had been no outcry at Russians working alongside Ossetians and Georgians in the tripartite peace-keeping force appointed in the June 1992 Dagomys Agreement that ended the S. Ossetian war. Thus did Abkhazia's conflict join that of S. Ossetia in the political 'freezer' — until 26th August 2008.

How were these 15 years characterised? The Georgians constantly assert(ed) that (i) Abkhazia is inseparable Georgian territory, (ii) by granting special status to Abkhazia, the early Soviets were setting time-bombs to frustrate any eventual Georgian striving for independence (which conveniently ignores the fact that Stalin was the man who directed Soviet nationalities' policy in the 1920s and that he too demoted Abkhazia's status in 1931), and (iii) the 1992-93 war was not won by the Abkhazians but by the Russians¹⁵. In the early post-war years, the West paid scant

¹⁴Though Yeltsin was just over the Abkhazian border in Sochi when the Georgian troops invaded, he was mysteriously unavailable to answer Ardzinba's frantic attempts to contact him in the hope that he might be persuaded to deter his former Politburo-colleague from continuing down the path to all-out war. This has led to the suspicion that Yeltsin knew in advance of Shevardnadze's plans and gave him the green light to win what was probably expected to be a speedy Georgian victory.

¹⁵This question is addressed by Dodge Billingsley in 'Military aspects of the war: the turning point', in G. Hewitt (ed.) *The Abkhazians: a Handbook* (1999, 147-156).

attention, but refusal to recognise Georgia's (specifically, Shevardnadze's) responsibility for the war meant that the guilty escaped even the tame punishment of being required to acknowledge Abkhazians' right to self-determination (let alone having to pay reparations); on the contrary, support for Georgia's territorial integrity carried the implicit demand that Abkhazians, who had strangely become transformed from victims to villains, ignore their military victory and meekly accept a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, as though nothing had happened. Abkhazia became ever more isolated, as a short-lived boat-link with Trebizond was suspended, CIS-sanctions were imposed, the Psou-border with Russia was closed to non-carriers of Soviet/Russian passports, and acts of terrorism were perpetrated (especially in the Gal Region) by such Georgian government-sponsored terrorist-groups as the White Legion and the Forest Brethren¹⁶. May 1998 even saw Georgia again resorting to arms — fire-fights close to the Ingur repelled the attack; Georgia escaped censure for these actions too. Throughout this period negotiations were taking place, confederation being the Abkhazians' maximum concession. Finally, exasperated with Georgian recalcitrance, the Abkhazians formally declared independence in late 1999, when they introduced amendments to the constitution that had been approved by referendum on 26th November 1994.

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

Despite continuing Western backing, Shevardnadze was increasingly unpopular at home for the air of stagnation that surrounded his presidency. He was

¹⁶The British daily 'The Guardian' in June 1998 interviewed Zurab Samushia, leader of the White Legion, who claimed they had 'executed' 47 members of the the CIS peacekeeping forces. Georgian journalist, Ak'ak'i Mikadze, writing in 'Vremja' (3rd June 1998), stated: 'The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Security actively support the partisan-groupings operating in the Gal Region. For example, fighters from the division called "Forest Brethren" officially receive wages of 200 lari (about 150 dollars), whilst their commander, criminal authority David Shengelia, receives 300 lari (about 220 dollars). The division supposedly numbers about 700, for whom wages and allowances are set aside from the budget'.

overthrown before the TV-cameras by his former protégé, Saak'ashvili, a Ukrainian/Dutch/US-educated lawyer with a flare for languages. The West (especially America) promptly transferred its support to the usurper, without waiting for him to secure electoral legitimacy, which came in early 2004, just as in spring/summer of 1992 Georgia under Shevardnadze's mandateless regime had been showered with benefits.

The advent of a new Georgian president might have been the moment to manifest a sense of realism vis-à-vis Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, but, yet again, any such opportunity was squandered, as Saak'ashvili set himself the nationalist goals of returning the lost territories (including the Muslim-Georgian region of Ach'ara in the south-west) during his first presidential term, offering Abkhazians the same old 'maximal autonomy' (until in early 2008, when the offer, 19 years too late, became a special federal arrangement). After peacefully regaining Ach'ara (May 2004), Saak'ashvili turned his attention to S. Ossetia, constantly prodding and provoking. As for Abkhazia, troops (allegedly mere policemen needed to restore order¹⁷) were introduced in the spring of 2006 into the Upper K'odor Valley, Abkhazia's sole region remaining under Tbilisi's control. They were quickly joined by the so-called 'Abkhazian Government-in-exile'. This provocation, which saw tourist-numbers plummet in the expectation of renewed fighting, produced no immediate Abkhazian response other than a halt to negotiations. Saak'ashvili engaged in bouts of verbal sparring with Putin in his baiting of the Russian bear, strengthened Georgia's western-orientation, sought NATO-membership, won US military aid and training, and purchased huge quantities of US, Ukrainian and Israeli weaponry. Alarm-bells sounded in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, as soon as the April 2008 Bucharest NATO-meeting (reportedly at the insistence of certain East European members with their agenda of vendetta against the Kremlin), instead of dismissing George Bush's ill-considered proposal to offer Georgia membership, promised reconsideration in December.

Whatever motivated Saak'ashvili's decision to bombard Tskhinval and other targets with tanks and Grad-missiles on 7th August (and, after the delayed release of the OSCE-report, it is indisputable that Georgia was the aggressor¹⁸), his hubris

¹⁷Saak'ashvili may have exposed his own 2-year lie about the nature of this unit, when he admits in his interview with Raphaël Glucksman: 'Le 8 août...nos meilleures troupes étaient en Irak et au Sud-Est de l'Abkhasie' (cited from the manuscript of *Je Vous Parle de Liberté*, published in November 2008 by Hachette). The quantity of heavy weaponry subsequently found abandoned in the Valley also suggests a more sinister purpose.

¹⁸Georgia's Deputy-Ambassador to London, Giorgi Badridze, cynically informed his BBC World viewers at the time that only Georgians could best protect the interests of the S. Ossetians and Abkhazians, a self-delusion that led the head of the surely obsolete Ministry for Reintegration, Teimuraz Iak'obashvili, to tell an audience at Tbilisi State University on 14th November that Georgia had a 'mission to save the Abkhazians and S. Ossetians from Russian domination'. Consider in this

summoned a double-fronted nemesis. Implementing their mutual defence-pact with Tskhinval, the Abkhazians acted to clear the K'odor; on 12th August, after a weekend's bombing, Georgian forces fled from Abkhazian ground-forces (as also along the Ingur), abandoning in addition to their store of munitions a computer containing 9 incriminating photographs: two US military contractors demonstrate to attentive Georgian soldiers techniques in improvised bomb-making, odd behaviour for representatives of a government that vaunts its post-9/11 anti-terror credentials — two of the photos are reproduced below¹⁹.

Conclusions

The international community indirectly condemned the Abkhazians, South Ossetians, and, yes, the various Kartvelian peoples caught up in the subsequent hostilities to great suffering by ratifying Georgia's (Stalin-drawn) Soviet borders. Gamsakhurdia had already brought death and destruction to S. Ossetia, but now Shevardnadze felt emboldened to act with impunity in Abkhazia (1992-93; 1998), followed by Saak'ashvili's mindlessness in S. Ossetia (2008²⁰). All the while the West has blindly supported Georgia's territorial integrity with a series of policies aimed at bringing the two disputed territories back under Tbilisi's thumb. But the sum-total of achievement has been: resentment at the West's double standards and pro-Georgian bias, plus ever closer ties to Russia, sealed by Russia's recognition of both on 26th August 2008 — the polar opposite of what the West desired.

Georgia's historical claims to Abkhazia have no foundation. Late-1980s' Georgian nationalism was responsible for reawakening dormant hostilities amongst both nationalities²¹ — whatever Russia might have felt about Georgia's move to independence, it could relax and enjoy the spectacle of the republic tearing itself apart. After three wars under Georgia's three post-communist presidents, any moral claims Tbilisi might advance for controlling Abkhazian and S. Ossetian destinies are dead. Ideally, Georgia should have offered recognition years ago, but, if such a move is beyond the wit or daring of any Georgian leader, then the West should promptly follow Russia's lead — it has set its own precedent in Kosovo; Tbilisi will then have no alternative. Abkhazia, at least, could then enjoy the advantages of balanced

context the following: 'A Russian political analyst told me about a Georgian minister who has been a friend of his since schooldays. "When we get together and have a drink, he tells me how he thinks the Abkhaz are scum and he wishes he could hang them all...But when he talks to the west, suddenly it's human rights, democracy, rule of law..." (Shaun Walker 'The Kosovo Precedent', *Prospect Magazine*, April 2008).

¹⁹For the others see www.warandpeace.ru.

²⁰This was Saak'ashvili's second attempt to recapture S. Ossetia, his first venture occurring in 2004.

²¹Though the Abkhazians watched apprehensively the growing presence on their territory of Mingrelian settlers, in practice the two communities were integrated with many mixed marriages. Abkhazians even today say they pity the Mingrelians: 'At least we Abkhazians know our identity. Mingrelians have been instructed to view themselves as Georgians, and so they no longer know who they are', is a common observation.

investment and influence — S. Ossetia's union with N. Ossetia is the logical eventuality. Any other course of action will risk turning Abkhazia into the very client-state that it has long been derided as being, something the Abkhazians themselves do not desire.

George W. Bush's administration cannot be blamed for the failure of policy that produced Georgia's 1992 recognition, but the same cannot be said of the expansion of US-interests into the republic (including the provision of arms) and promoting the same for NATO. Many have rightly criticised such pointless antagonising of Russia, which, for better or worse, has interests in Transcaucasia. It was (and will remain) folly to ignore this. Some argue that, had Russian forces stopped at S. Ossetia's border in August, Moscow would have held the moral high ground. But, given the amount of weaponry in Tbilisi's hands (lodged in such bases as Gori, near S. Ossetia, and Senak'i, close to Abkhazia), to have done so would have left military capability in Saak'ashvili's untrustworthy hands and exposed Abkhazia to subsequent invasion. Thus, the Gori and Senak'i bases (plus the vessels in port at Poti) had to be neutralised. Collateral loss of life and property is regrettable, just as the creation of floods of refugees from the wars in the early 1990s was regrettable — no such disruption need have occurred, if Georgia's successive leaderships had pursued wiser policies. But a mass-return of Mingrelians to areas of Abkhazia outside the Gal District is unrealistic, as the Abkhazians cannot risk being swamped again by potential 5th-columnists so susceptible to the intrigues of Tbilisi. International recognition, though, would perhaps give the Abkhazians greater confidence to permit larger numbers to return than will otherwise happen.

To judge by the embarrassing posturing of Condoleeza Rice (USA), David Miliband (UK) and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (NATO) in the wake of the August events, some still hanker after repeating the futile policies of the past. The election of Barack Obama, however, presents a unique opportunity to change course and act more intelligently before the same mistakes lead to further disastrous consequences²². None of the disputed Transcaucasian territories (including Nagorno-Karabagh) will return to their Soviet controllers. The three should be recognised forthwith. All regional states should then be given guarantees for their security, if they agree to disarm. With the full involvement of Russia, encouragement should be given to the creation of a regional Common Market, if not (Trans)Caucasian Union, to promote a spirit of cooperation and stability across the isthmus (possibly including Russia's North Caucasian territories). Continuing instability and threats of renewed conflict serve no-one's interests.

²²For this purpose all proponents of the 'old thinking', such as (to judge by his interviews from Tbilisi in August) Richard Holbrooke, will need to be kept well away from discussions pertaining to Caucasian affairs.

