
Notes of the Month
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War in the Caucasus?

As the high hopes for a New World Order arising from the ashes of the Cold War crumble, 'ethnic cleansing' looks set to be the hallmark of the 1990s, with old nationalist scores being settled free of the restraining hand of the superpowers or of tough Communist regimes. The attention of the European Community has necessarily been focused on the situation in the territories of what was Yugoslavia, for the turmoil in the Balkans is uncomfortably close to home. But apart from the continuing crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, relatively little attention has been paid to the situation in Transcaucasia and, in particular, Georgia, which declared its independence in April 1991. The granting of sovereignty has been seen as a universal panacea for the problems consequent on the breakup of the Soviet empire. But this can have dire consequences for minorities, as the current crisis in Abkhazia demonstrates.

On 14 August Georgian forces launched a fierce ground and air attack on Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, one of two autonomous republics within Georgia. The ostensible pretext was that the Mingrelian kidnappers of the Georgian Interior Minister, Roman Gventsadze, had spirited him into Abkhazia with the connivance of the Abkhazians. The kidnapping had been carried out by supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the demagogic but none the less reasonably democratically elected President of Georgia, who had been overthrown in last January's dramatic fighting in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital.

Gamsakhurdia, himself a Mingrelian and now in exile in Grozny, the capital of Chechenia, still enjoys considerable support in Western Georgia, or more particularly Mingrelia, which has been in turmoil since his overthrow. Indeed, Georgian heavy-handedness has prompted a growing number of Mingrelians (who have their own language and represent approximately a fifth of the total population of Georgia) to think of themselves as constituting a distinct ethnic group. The Abkhazians have little reason to align themselves with an arch-nationalist such as Gamsakhurdia (who has described them as 'agents of Moscow, instructed to kill innocent Georgians') or to take sides in what is essentially an intra-Georgian quarrel.

It immediately became apparent that the primary purpose of the Georgian attack on Sukhumi had nothing to do with the kidnapping and everything to do with bringing to heel the Abkhazians who, under the leadership of Vladislav Ardzinba, an academic, had effectively declared their independence in July by voting for the re-instatement of the 1925 Constitution. This had confirmed the status of the rich (and astonishingly beautiful) Abkhazian lands as a full union republic, with special treaty links with Georgia. In 1931, however, Stalin (aka Ioseb Jughashvili and himself, of course, a Georgian) reduced Abkhazia to the status of an autonomous republic within Georgia, a move which lies at the heart of the current conflict.

Already in the nineteenth century large numbers of Abkhazians (some are Moslem, some are Christian, all, for the moment at least, wear their religion lightly) had been forced to join the great migration of North Caucasian peoples to the Ottoman Empire as a consequence of Tsarist imperialism. After 1931, the demographic balance in Abkhazia was further undermined. For Stalin's henchman, the Mingrelian Lavrenti Beria, at that time Georgian Party Secretary, and his successors systematically settled large numbers of Mingrelians, Georgians and others in the Abkhaz lands. Abkhazian schools were replaced by Georgian schools, a Georgian-based alphabet was imposed for the fearsomely difficult Abkhazian language.

These measures were rescinded following the death of Stalin, but the Abkhazians had by then become a minority within their own land. Indeed, they now constitute only some 18 per cent of the population, as against a Mingrelian/Georgian population of some 45 per cent. But there is a tacit alliance between the Abkhazians and the other non-Georgians in the region – the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Armenians and others who together constitute a majority, albeit a narrow one.

All minorities in Georgia, who make up some 30 per cent of the total population of the republic, have felt threatened by the rampant nationalism, epitomised by Gamsakhurdia, that fuelled the movement which culminated in Georgia's declaration of independence. The 1989 Language Law makes Georgian compulsory for all, although for many Abkhazians (as indeed for many Armenians, Greeks and Ossetians) Russian is the second or even first language. Georgian propaganda maintains that the Abkhazians, whose presence in the region is attested in antiquity, are relative latecomers into what is essentially Georgian territory. The situation in the region has been tense following armed clashes in Sukhumi in 1989.

It is not only the Abkhazians who have been subject to Georgian coercion. There have been violent clashes with Azeris in South Georgia, and Avar villagers in East Georgia have been compulsorily expropriated and expelled to Daghestan. Tens of thousands of South Ossetians have been pushed over the border into North Ossetia (part of the Russian Federation) as a consequence of a bloody conflict that got under way in 1990. Although information is hard to come by, the situation in South Ossetia appears to have stabilised somewhat following the despatch of Russian peace-keeping troops. There is also considerable unease among the Adzharians, Georgian-speaking Moslems whose autonomous republic borders on Turkey and who fear that, after the South Ossetians and the Abkhazians, it may be their turn.

The Georgians have made no attempt to hide their true intentions in Abkhazia. On 25 August – on television, no less – Colonel Giorgi Karkarashvili, the military commander of the operation, threatened to 'leave the entire Abkhaz nation without descendants'. If the sacrifice of 100,000 Georgian lives was required to wipe out 97,000 Abkhazians, he said, then so be it. This appears to be no idle threat, for Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister who took over the reins of power in his native Georgia following the downfall of Gamsakhurdia, has himself conceded that his troops have committed atrocities during the course of fierce fighting.

Boris Yeltsin's initial reaction to the outbreak of fighting on

the borders of the Russian Federation was that this was essentially an internal Georgian matter. But he failed to appreciate the massive upsurge of pro-Abkhazian and anti-Georgian feeling among his own North Caucasian populations, who have grouped themselves in the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus.

Moreover, support for the embattled Abkhazians has not only been at the level of rhetoric. As many as 2,000 heavily armed volunteers from Chechenia, Circassia and elsewhere have made their way over rugged mountains of the Caucasus, despite Russian attempts to seal the frontier. It is clear that the Georgians have found it a great deal more difficult to subdue the Abkhazians than they had envisaged. After an initial retreat to their stronghold in the Gudauta region, the Abkhazians, following a series of spectacular victories, control the entire region from the Russian border to the outskirts of Sukhumi.

Fears have been expressed that if the conflict continues the Russian Federation risks being embroiled in a Caucasian war of the type that convulsed the region in the nineteenth century, and that failure to take action may spur other Caucasian peoples living in the Russian Federation to imitate the Chechens (who have unilaterally declared their own independence) in breaking with Russia. These were some of the factors that prompted an increasingly worried President Yeltsin to summon Shevardnadze and Ardzinba to Moscow for peace talks on 3 September. These resulted in a ceasefire but this soon broke down. Since then Shevardnadze has openly accused Russia of assisting the Abkhazians, and increasingly intemperate exchanges between the Georgian and Russian leaders have raised the spectre of an outright clash between the two countries.

Russia, as the former imperial power with a sizeable contingent of its nationals still living in Abkhazia, clearly has the responsibility as well as the power to work towards some kind of resolution of the crisis. The Abkhazian conflict scarcely reflects a direct threat to Western interests. None the less, it is instructive to contrast the reactions of Western leaders to the not dissimilar crises in the Balkans and the Caucasus. The West has, albeit belatedly, made a pariah of the Serbs and, indeed, talks of bringing those guilty of war crimes to trial. The European Community, moreover, in deference to Greek susceptibilities, has used the threat of non-recognition in an attempt to coerce the Macedonians to abandon the name of Macedonia for their new state.

These same leaders, however, have maintained a studied silence in the face of threatened genocide in Abkhazia. Moreover, far from using the threat of non-recognition to secure acceptable behaviour, the Western powers hastened to recognise Georgia once Shevardnadze had returned in the aftermath of the bloody coup that toppled Gamsakhurdia. The Russian government, with a greater awareness of the dynamics of power in independent Georgia and of the likelihood that the warlords who toppled Gamsakhurdia will be more inclined to control Shevardnadze than vice versa, was more circumspect.

What is more, the Western powers have hastened to follow up recognition with official visits designed further to bolster Shevardnadze's position. Earlier this year, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German Foreign Minister, James Baker, the American Secretary of State, and Douglas Hogg, Minister of State at the Foreign Office, have all been to Tbilisi despite a highly uncertain security situation. Indeed, a high-powered British official delegation was visiting the Georgian capital at precisely the moment when Shevardnadze authorised the attack on Sukhumi. These various expressions of support for Shevardnadze suggest that feelings of indebtedness dating from the days of superpower summitry, and a readiness to do a good turn to an old chum (James Baker's relations with Shevardnadze are said to be particularly close) are the mainsprings of Western policy towards Georgia. But a cosy 'old pals act' is scarcely a better guide to diplomacy than sentiment.

Optimists had hoped that a victory (never in doubt given that he was the sole candidate) in the 11 October elections for the leadership of Georgia might enable Shevardnadze to distance himself from the wild men with whom he has so far been obliged to share power and lead to a more conciliatory policy towards the Abkhazians. So far such hopes have not materialised. If anything, his attitude since the elections has become even more belligerent, and he appears bent on a military solution. But his forces have already suffered severe reverses; they are demoralised and he has lost the critical element of surprise. Moreover, any attempt to regain control of Abkhazia by military means might well provoke a higher level of involvement on the part of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus in aid of their Abkhazian allies. The Russian Federation might also move from a position of tacit to that of overt support of the Abkhazian cause. In such a case a replay of the current Balkan imbroglio, but on an even larger scale, would become a real possibility. The consequences for regional security in such an eventuality would then be incalculable.

RICHARD CLOGG

Central Europe I: what about the Hungarian minorities?

Overshadowed by the dramatic and bloody struggles between warring nations and ethnic groups in the former multinational states of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, a new factor of destabilisation has emerged in Central and Eastern Europe: the large Hungarian minorities in Romania, Serbia and Czechoslovakia. The deep-rooted mutual suspicion between the Hungarians, who once ruled the Danube Basin, and the successor-states of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is no longer tucked away in the Communist refrigerator. What began already in the early 1980s as an increasingly public debate between Budapest and the other Central European Communist capitals has now become an open and emotional conflict, involving borders and minorities as well as economic issues in the heart of Europe.

The Hungarian Prime Minister, Joszef Antall, made it very clear shortly after taking over the helm of the first non-Communist government in 40 years that Hungary proper – and he himself – will act as defenders of the national interests of the Hungarian minorities. This was the real meaning of his famous phrase that