

After 30 years Georgians still refuse to acknowledge their own responsibility for the conflict with the Abkhazians and fail to understand that there can be no resolution to it until they accept that the direct parties to their Transcaucasian disputes are the Abkhazians and South Ossetians (NOT the Russians).

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July 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the first fatal clashes between the Georgians and the Abkhazians in the decades- (if not century-)long dispute over ownership of the small territory known to the autochthonous Abkhazians as *Apsny*, to the Georgians as *apxazeti*, and to most of the world as *Abkhazia*.

With Georgian Joseph Stalin and Mingrelian Lavrent'i Beria safely in their graves (both left the scene in 1953), Abkhazia was to witness disturbances related to local dissatisfaction with domination of their affairs by Tbilisi once a decade at roughly 10-yearly intervals, that in 1978, which *inter alia* saw the painting over of Georgian names on road-signs, being the last one to flare up prior to the fighting that broke out in the centre of Abkhazia's capital Aq^w'a (more widely known as Sukhum but in Georgian *soxumi*) on the night of Saturday 15 July. The proximate cause of the violent confrontation was the Georgian plan to hold entrance-exams on Monday 17 July for the Branch of Tbilisi State University. This institution had provocatively (and illegally) been set up to accommodate the Georgian faculty-members of the Abkhazian State University (established in the wake of the 1978 disturbances!) who, as part of the anti-Abkhazian measures promulgated by Georgia's nationalist leaders (most prominently the Mingrelians Merab K'ost'ava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia), had broken away from the Abkhazian State University earlier in the year. But the Abkhazians had been subjected to months of vitriol across the entire Georgian media supplemented by regional demonstrations organised by Georgian nationalists, wherein perhaps the most insulting claim was that the people we know today as the *Abkhazians* but who call themselves *Apswaa* (Georgian *apxazebi*) and whose native language together with Circassian and the now extinct Ubykh forms the North West Caucasian language-family descend from migrants who crossed from the North Caucasus into Abkhazia just a few centuries ago; after their arrival south of the Caucasian mountain-chain, they (so the argument goes) took over the ethnonym of the 'true' indigenous local population, who were speakers of a 'Georgian' (or should we not rather say Kartvelian?) language/dialect (Georgian being but one of the four languages that constitute the South Caucasian or Kartvelian language-

family, viz. Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan?). The implication (as far as the Georgians are concerned) of this ludicrous myth (but one which is still disseminated and widely believed) is that the Abkhazians have no historical justification to claim sovereignty over the territory. Given that the rallying cry of the Georgian nationalists in 1989 was 'Georgia for the Georgians', it did not take the Abkhazians long to reach the conclusion that their very physical survival on Abkhazian soil was threatened by what they were hearing/reading from their Georgian neighbours (and not only from the leading nationalist agitators but from otherwise respected academics, predominantly from the community of linguists and historians).

The historical assertion just adumbrated actually goes back to the Georgian historian Dimit'ri Bakradze writing in the 1880s at a time when most of the Abkhazians had moved to the Ottoman Empire following Russia's victory in the Great Caucasian War (1864) and the subsequent Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), thus leaving the fertile soil of Abkhazia denuded of its native population. However, it is most commonly referred to as the 'Ingoroq'va Hypothesis', named after P'avle Ingoroq'va (a self-taught writer on Georgian literature) who developed the fiction by fabricating a slew of nonsensical arguments not only to support the basic proposition but also to 'justify' the fate that was being centrally planned for the Abkhazians in the late 1940s, namely wholesale deportation to Siberia/Central Asia, after the pattern set by Stalin/Beria for such peoples as the Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Koreans, Chechens, Ingush, and the Meskhetians.

I dealt with this and other questions pertaining to Georgian-Abkhazian relations in my first publication on this topic (namely 'Abkhazia: a problem of identity and ownership' in *Central Asian Survey*, 1993) and have had occasion to return to it numerous times over subsequent years, culminating in my monograph (*Discordant Neighbours: a Re-assessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*, Brill, 2013). But in view of the fact that in a posting entitled *Putin offers alternative 'historic facts' on how Georgia 'occupied' Tskhinvali, Abkhazia regions* (dated 10 July 2019 and available at <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/1860>) readers are presented with a restatement of the deliberate traducing of Abkhazian history in the words 'The arrival and settling of North Caucasian tribes on Georgian territory started in the 15th -17th centuries. One of such tribes made a settlement in the Abkhazia region as they faced problems in the North Caucasus', it is clear that absolutely nothing has been learned by many (?most, ?all) on the Georgian side. And, as has been said many times, those who fail to learn the lessons of history are fated to repeat the same mistakes. Therefore, I judge it fully appropriate to restate the FACTS on today's 30th anniversary of the killings in Abkhazia on 15 July 1989 by presenting immediately below two

passages from my 2013 book.¹

Genesis of the 'Ingoroq'va Hypothesis'

Had the Abkhazians actually been deported, it would have been convenient to have some 'justification' to hand. In this context it is relevant to mention a publication by the specialist on Georgian literature, P'avle Ingoroq'va. The work in question first appeared in two issues of the Georgian literary journal *Mnatobi* 'Luminary' (1950, 1 & 3) but is most readily accessible as chapter 4 in the author's massive book 'Giorgi Merchule' (1954).² Though Ingoroq'va nowhere mentions him, it was the Georgian historian Dimit'ri Bakradze (1889.272-273), as Abkhazian historian Zurab Anchabadze (1959.221) observed, who first proposed what has become known as the 'Ingoroq'va Hypothesis', namely that the Abkhazians were relative newcomers onto 'Georgian' territory, displacing the 'original' (Kartvelian-speaking [sic!]) Abkhazians in the 17th century and thus becoming known to the outside-world as 'Abkhazians'.³ For a few years in the mid-20th century, this was the canonical view of Abkhazian history within the USSR (or within Georgia, at least), and the most prominent Abkhazian literary figure of his day, Dmitri (Dyrmit') Gulia, was forced to recant the 'errors' in his own 1925 history of Abkhazia (see Gulia 1986 for its most recent reprinting) in a booklet (1951) to bring his views into conformity with Ingoroq'va's newly postulated historical 'facts'.

In the light of the anger in Abkhazia over Ingoroq'va and the wider dissemination of his hypothesis resulting from its republication in the 1954 book, two politicians, A. Labakhua and I. Tarba, were moved to write to the Presidium of the Communist Party on 19 April 1957 (Sagarija et al. 1992.557; Hewitt 1996.267):

Ingoroq'va strives 'to lay a foundation' for his anti-scholarly thesis by means of the falsification of historical documents and pseudo-scholarly linguistic exercises on toponyms.

Though criticised from a historical perspective by then-head of the Georgian Institute of History, Nik'o Berdzenishvili (1956) and on certain linguistic points by Georgian specialist on Abkhaz, Ketevan Lomtadze (1956), the 1954 book received favourable reviews for its 'contribution' to the history of 'western Georgia' from such Georgian academics as (classicist) Simon Q'aukhchishvili (1957) and (phonetician) Giorgi

¹ To understand who was responsible for the fighting and resulting deaths in Abkhazia that fateful night 30 years ago see the late Victor Popkov's article 'Soviet Abkhazia 1989: a personal account' in my edited book *The Abkhazians: a Handbook*, Curzon Press, 1999, pp. 102-131.

² The manuscript was submitted to the printers in 1951 before the deaths in 1953 of both Stalin and Beria.

³ Recall that the Abkhazians' self-designation is *Apswa*, in the singular, vs *Apswaa*, in the plural.

Akhvlediani (1957). Despite the date of the publications of the aforementioned pro-Ingoroq'van reviews, after Stalin's and Beria's deaths (in 1953), their anti-Abkhazian campaign was reversed: a new, Cyrillic-based alphabet was devised for Abkhaz; schools were reopened; publishing and broadcasting were restarted; and Abkhazians were allowed a larger share of important posts than their numbers might otherwise have dictated, a fact that was used against them in the bitter debates that began in the late 1980s, when the Abkhazians were charged with being a favoured national minority. The change in the political climate saw Ingoroq'va himself virtually consigned to a 30-year academic limbo. But the reason why it is necessary to highlight the Ingoroq'va controversy is that its ramifications continue to echo loudly today, as detailed later in this work.

Revival of the 'Ingoroq'va Hypothesis' (and Variants)

Historian Prof. Nodar Lomouri weighed in with an essay published on 7 April in *Lit'erat'uruli Sakartvelo* (p. 4) entitled 'How should we understand the ethnonym "Abkhazian"?'⁴ In it he made the following call:

It is necessary and urgent to investigate the problems through the combined resources of representatives of different areas of scholarship. But the main thing is that a path be opened for truly scholarly and unbiased research into the history of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz language, the culture created over centuries on the territory of Abkhazia, the toponymy of Abkhazia and other spheres.

This was tantamount to an invitation to revisit the debate of the 1950s, and literary critic Rost'om Chkheidze duly obliged with relish. In *Lit'erat'uruli Sakartvelo* of 21 April (pp. 4-5),⁵ he raised the issue of the non-reprinting of the offensive part of Ingoroq'va's 1954 book *Giorgi Merchule* in the 7-volume edition of his works planned from 1959 and took the opportunity to rehash the main controversial points of the work:

- the inhabitants of Abkhazia in ancient and mediæval times were speakers of Georgian [*recte* Kartvelian—BGH] dialects;
- the relevant etymologies discussed in the work are Georgian;
- the Abkhazian Kingdom was, thus, a Georgian polity;
- the terms 'Abkhazia(n)' derive from the Georgian tribal name /mosxi/.

Chkheidze cites the favourable reviews that the general outlines of the said theory received in the pages of the journal *Mnatobi* [Luminary] 2 (1957), as detailed in Chapter 2, airily dismissing counter-arguments as being totally non-scholarly. Naturally, he

⁴ /rogor unda gvesmodes etnonimi 'apxazi'?.

⁵ In an article entitled /p'avle ingoroq'vas txzulebata meore t'omis gamo/ 'On the second volume of the works of P'avle Ingoroq'va'.

elected to ignore both the 1956 demonstration by Georgia's leading abkhazologist, Ketevan Lomtadze, that Ingoroq'va's Georgian-based etymologies are simply unsustainable as well as the burgeoning compendium of purely scholarly articles, written both at the time and since, which quite undermine every aspect of the said hypothesis. Chkheidze went on to remind his readers of the political intervention which prevented both the reprinting of *Giorgi Merchule* and the author's election to the Georgian Academy, observing:

Concessions were made, and today we are reaping precisely the consequences of this ... This is how it was and this is how things proceeded in those dark years, as well as today. This state of affairs certainly has to change.

In a later article he went to call for Ingoroq'va's academic rehabilitation.⁶

A literary battle then ensued, played out on the pages of various papers, journals and books. Representatives of each side (historians, linguists, literature-experts, journalists, and commentators who claimed no special expertise) addressed a multitude of issues such as:

- the position of the Abkhaz language;
- the history of Abkhazia;
- the meaning of the term 'Abkhaz(ian)' (or its translation-equivalents in different languages);
- the settlement of the territory of Abkhazia.

The Abkhazian position is straightforward, namely:

Abkhaz is a North West Caucasian language; speakers of Proto-North West Caucasian came from the south, and Abkhaz probably developed on the territory of Abkhazia, just as the sister-languages (Ubykh and Circassian) developed *in situ* once their ancestral speakers had continued moving north over the Caucasian mountain-range, and it was only after the great migrations in the closing decades of the 19th century that non-Abkhazians first appeared on Abkhazian soil (though the precise demarcation between Abkhazia and Mingrelia will have fluctuated, depending on the comparative power of these two princedoms at different times in history); Abkhazia suffered political repression to the advantage of Georgia in the years 1918-21 and again under Stalin and Beria, when falsification of Abkhazian history reached its apogee in the work of Ingoroq'va; whereas the Kremlin recognised these errors after Stalin's death, took steps to see that Tbilisi made amends, and allowed the publication of scholarly works presenting an accurate history of Abkhazia and the Abkhazians, it failed to rectify Stalin's major decision of 1931 to subordinate Abkhazia to Tbilisi and refused to

⁶ Though Ingoroq'va (1893-1990) never achieved the status of academician, the street in Tbilisi on which stands the Linguistics Institute of the Georgian Academy of Sciences was eventually renamed Ingoroq'va Street.

remove Abkhazia from Georgian jurisdiction for fear of the consequences that would stem from an enraged Tbilisi.

There are basically two Georgian positions:

- 1. For shorthand, this might be styled the Ingoroq'van view, whereby the Abkhazians we know today are assumed to be relative late-comers to the 'Georgian' territory of Abkhazia (exactly how late depends on which commentator one chooses to follow),⁷ whilst the original 'Abkhazians' were a Kartvelian-speaking tribe.
- 2. The less extreme position is that Abkhazia always had two aboriginal peoples, Abkhazians and Kartvelians, though the latter were always in the majority.

Either way, Abkhazia is deemed an 'inalienable, primæval part of Georgia' (/sakartvelos dzirdzveli gamouq'opeli nats'ili/), the mediæval Kingdom of Abkhazia was a Georgian polity, and Russia⁸ alone bears responsibility for Georgia's woes by creating 'illegitimate' autonomies on Georgian soil, designed ultimately to frustrate any Georgian moves to secede from the Union, and by manipulating Centre-minority relations within Georgia ever since.

This stance, which continues to this day, signally fails to explain, of course, how such a malign external force could possibly have engineered the range of publications, verbal lashings, or socio-political actions emanating from, or orchestrated by, Tbilisi which the Abkhazians and South Ossetians (not to mention certain other minorities living within Georgia's Soviet frontiers) found so offensive and alarming that they judged the safer option for them was not to join Georgia's drive for independence, whilst recognising Georgians' undeniable right to determine their own destiny. They elected to follow Georgia's precedent and seek to exercise their own right to self-determination, innocently expecting their choice to be respected by the international community in line with Article 1 (paragraph 2) of the Charter of the United Nations, which states that the second purpose and principle is:

To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.

⁷ Some linguistic arguments advanced to provide variations on Ingoroq'va's theme have been countered in my own articles. I refer readers to Hewitt (1992a; 1993; 1993a; 1995). My paper (1993b) is of particular importance, as it counters an especially egregious example of the genre, produced in both Georgian and Russian versions by Academician Prof. Tamaz Gamq'relidze, Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, who is well-known in Western linguistic circles for his collaborative work with Vjacheslav Ivanov on Proto-Indo European and, though somewhat less so, for his collaborative work with the late Givi Mach'avariani on proto-Kartvelian. Gamq'relidze's paper follows in the same journal my own translation of his Georgian original, which I decided to render into English so that readers unable to cope with either the Georgian or the Russian versions could experience the full flavour of the tendentious argumentation expounded therein.

⁸ Be it Soviet or post-Soviet.

The former of the two Georgian positions just adumbrated is that two types of Abkhazians need to be differentiated, and this is the reason why adherents of this view use the native Abkhazian self-designation ‘Apswa(a)’ to refer to those they regard as having usurped the original Kartvelian Abkhazian ethnonym along with their lands. Thus, for a Georgian (or a supporter of the Georgian stance in the conflict) to use the term ‘Apswa(a)’ is a calculated insult to the Abkhazians, rather than the compliment one might otherwise suppose, given the inherent implication of the hypothesis that Abkhazians have no historical claim to the territory, being relatively recent interlopers on ‘Georgian’ soil.

The notion of dual aboriginal status for Abkhazia is most closely associated today with the name of the historian Prof. Mariam (Marik’a) Lortkipanidze,⁹ though it was perhaps first introduced by Prof. Nik’o Berdzenishvili. Now, Berdzenishvili was mentioned in Chapter 2 as one of those who actually criticised Ingoroq’va in 1956. The explanation that has been advanced to account for the apparent inconsistency in his positions is that, as Director of the History Institute, Berdzenishvili had no option but to bow to pressure from the authorities and follow the then politically correct line, whereas his actual opinion (and, according to this interpretation, the ungarnished truth) is rather to be found in volume VIII of his collected works (1975; 1990), to which we shall allude below. In similar fashion, it is argued that what happened in, and with respect to, Abkhazia during the Menshevik years or later when Stalin and Beria reigned supreme was not dictated by any anti-Abkhazian policy but was rather normal socio-political development, accompanied by unbiased analysis of the history of western Georgia,¹⁰ whereas the State’s post-Stalin stance allowed Abkhazians to spread distortions of historical truths. The arguments continue to the present day.¹¹

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⁹ I should like to take this opportunity to explain that the ascription to me of the editorship of one of Lortkipanidze’s works (namely, *Georgia in the 11th-12th Centuries* by Mariam Lordkipanidze [sic], Tbilisi, Ganatleba, 1987) was done without my knowledge or approval. The extent of my contribution was to check and correct the English of the translation. The ascription was no doubt meant at the time to be a compliment, but it is now more of an embarrassment.

¹⁰ We can illustrate this by noting the response by the aforementioned Nodar Lomouri in *Lit’erat’uruli Sakartvelo* on 20 October to a rejoinder to his earlier article by Abkhazian ethnologist Prof. Shalva Inal-Ipa, who published an article entitled ‘About my people, its language and homeland’ in the Russian-language *Sovetskaja Abxazija* ‘Soviet Abkhazia’ on 16 September. Lomouri alluded to Ingoroq’va, saying (p. 3):

I personally do not agree with P’. Ingoroq’va’s views, but it is a pure, scholarly hypothesis. Abkhazian scholars from the very start did not like this hypothesis and worked so hard that they managed not only to put a stop to the book but halted the publication of several volumes of his collected works. An alarming fact, but fact it is!

¹¹ See such large-scale works as Agwazhba & Achugba (2005; 2008) or Anchabadze & Argun (2007), on the Abkhazian side, vs Gamakharia et al. (2007) or P’ap’askiri (2009), on the Georgian side.

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[See also my article: History in the context of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, in *Iran and the Caucasus* 18, 153-179, 2014]