

**Timothy K. BLAUVELT**

**LANGUAGE EDUCATION  
AND ETHNIC RESENTMENT  
IN SOVIET ABKHAZIA, 1939–53\***

The closing of Abkhazian primary schools beginning in the 1945–46 school year and the substitution of Georgian for Abkhaz as the language of instruction for Abkhaz pupils until 1953 occupied a central place in the litany of Abkhaz complaints toward the Georgian authorities in the decades leading up to the collapse of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> At a time by which Stalinist statism had transformed the earlier modernist Bolshevik understanding of national identity as historical and contingent – hence changeable and ultimately finite – into a primitive form of primordialism,<sup>2</sup> this policy seemed to undermine both the “content” and the “form” of Abkhaz national identity and to challenge the very existence of an Abkhaz ethnicity.

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with an approach that I have used in earlier publications about Abkhazia, I use “Abkhaz” to refer to an ethnic category of people and language, and “Abkhazian” and “Abkhazians” as an institutional category (e.g., the Abkhazian Obkom) and one of citizenship that can include nonethnically Abkhaz residents of Abkhazia as well.

<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see Terry Martin. *Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism* // Sheila Fitzpatrick (Ed.). *Stalinism: New Directions*. London, 2000. P. 358.

### *Abkhazia under Lakoba*

Informal networks played a central role in enabling the early Soviet state to consolidate its authority throughout the USSR, and particularly in the periphery. Such networks allowed officials to exchange information, allocate resources, and coordinate action to implement the policies and directives of the center given the weakness of the formal institutions of the party and state in the periphery and the chronic shortages and inefficiencies of the formal administrative-command structures. Elites in the centers used their administrative patronage resources to promote local cadres, who used this support to build regional machines on the local level that in turn backed the central elites to form powerful vertical networks.<sup>3</sup> The ruling network in Abkhazia emerged from the start of Soviet power under the leadership of Nestor Lakoba, an old Bolshevik with long associations with Bolshevik leaders in the Caucasus such as Sergo Orjonikidze, Sergei Kirov, Lev Kamenev, and Stalin. Lakoba headed an extensive patronage network of Abkhazian elites and was genuinely popular among the ethnic Abkhazian population, thus maintaining strong support both from Moscow and from the local population. As chairman of the Abkhazian Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) and of the Abkhazian Central Executive Committee (TsIK) (the former was fused into the latter in 1930), Lakoba's power base was in the government institutions rather than in the party. One of the key goals of his leadership seems to have been to maintain social and ethnic harmony in Abkhazia, even when that conflicted with Bolshevik demands for intensified class conflict.<sup>4</sup>

A significant factor in the consolidation of Lakoba's primarily ethnically Abkhaz patronage network was Soviet nationalities policy. The Soviet regime in the minority regions made use of a conciliatory approach of co-opting local elites of the "titular" ethnicity into leadership positions,<sup>5</sup> a systematic

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<sup>3</sup> See Gerald Easter. *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia*. Cambridge, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the origins of Lakoba's patronage network in Abkhazia, see Timothy Blauvelt. *Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era // Nationalities Papers*. 2007. Vol. 25. Pp. 213–232; and Timothy Blauvelt. *The Establishment of Soviet Power in Abkhazia: Ethnicity, Contestation and Clientalism in the Revolutionary Periphery // Revolutionary Russia*. 2014. Vol. 27. Pp. 22–46.

<sup>5</sup> As Claire Pogue Kaiser suggests, perhaps the "titular" nationalities could be better characterized as "entitled" nationalities. See Claire Pogue Kaiser. *Lived Nationality: Policy and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945–1978 / PhD dissertation; University of Pennsylvania*, 2015.

“indigenization” referred to as nationalization or *korenizatsiia*. This also entailed official encouragement of minorities’ cultures and languages to speed up their “national development,” to gain their loyalty to the regime, and to induce their collaboration in the building of a socialist future. To cite a summation of Soviet nationalities policy, “the USSR institutionalized ethnicity in a federal structure that enshrined the paradoxical combination of ethnic and civic nationalism in a manner that determined access to scarce resources and life chances.”<sup>6</sup> In Abkhazia, as in other regions in the Soviet periphery, finding competent personnel to co-opt among the titular ethnicity was a persistent problem. This created a “hole in the middle” situation, in which titular cadres were well represented at the top and bottom levels of the state and party bureaucracy, yet always in deficit at the level of qualified middle managers.<sup>7</sup> Lakoba’s leadership group therefore worked out a *modus vivendi* with regard to language use, ethnicity, and Soviet nationalities policy by relying heavily on ethnically Russian administrators and technical specialists. Partially for this reason, the actual implementation of “linguistic *korenizatsiia*” – official use of the Abkhaz language – was resisted. More comprehensive use of the Abkhaz language was impractical, it was virtually impossible for nonnative speakers (especially the Russian bureaucrats) to learn Abkhaz, and further encouragement of linguistic affirmative action could only strengthen the position and use of Georgian (the titular language of the larger Georgian SSR to which Abkhazia was in various ways subordinated),<sup>8</sup> which Abkhaz leaders seem to have perceived as contrary to their interests. Therefore, like the postcolonial elites in some African countries who preferred English or French as the language of officialdom rather than their own local languages, Abkhaz elites during the period of Lakoba’s rule thus emphasized Russian as the dominant official language in order to forestall the incursion of Georgian.<sup>9</sup> At the same time,

<sup>6</sup> Nick Megoran. On Researching “Ethnic Conflict”: Epistemology, Politics, and a Central Asian Boundary Dispute // *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2007. Vol. 59. P. 256.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca, 2001. P. 179.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of “Sovietization” in March 1921 Abkhazia had the status of a Soviet Republic; from February 1922 until February 1931 Abkhazia had the somewhat nebulous status of “Treaty Republic” (*Dogovornaia respublika*) that entered the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) through the Georgian SSR; and from February 1931 Abkhazia’s status was reduced to that of a regular Autonomous Republic with the Georgian SSR.

<sup>9</sup> See Sinfree Makoni, Busi Makoni, Ashraf Abdelhay and Pedzisai Mashiri. *Colonial and Postcolonial Language Policies in Africa: Historical and Emerging Landscapes* // Bernard

they pursued their ethnic cultural and political development through the other aspects of Soviet nationality policy, not least through patronage and the power of appointments.<sup>10</sup> The importance of Russian among the Abkhaz was perhaps further emphasized by the opportunities it provided for migration elsewhere in the union beyond the Georgian Republic (especially as nationality policy gave the titular Georgians priority in the Georgian SSR, thus limiting opportunities for ethnic minorities within the republic). One of the few overt manifestations of linguistic korenizatsiia in Abkhazia was that from the 1920s the first four grades in Abkhaz schools (which make up only about 15 percent of the total number of schools in Abkhazia) were taught in Abkhaz.<sup>11</sup>

The Great Terror in 1937 wreaked particular destruction in Abkhazia, decimating the entire Lakoba network and nearly all the elites associated with him far down into Abkhazian society. As this was implemented by the Tbilisi-based network of Lavrentyi Beria, it has generally been seen as a major step in the assertion of Georgian dominance in the republic, part of the turn in the broader Stalinist nationality policy of supporting the larger nations at the expense of the smaller and more “backward” ones: the “Great Retreat” in Soviet nationalities policy meant not the abandonment of “korenizatsiia” and support for ethnic privileges, but rather a focus on consolidation of the larger ethnicities, especially the ones that had union republics. In the formulation of Yuri Slezkine, “nationality policy had abandoned the pursuit of countless rootless nationalities in order to concentrate on a few full-fledged, fully equipped ‘nations.’”<sup>12</sup> Stalin’s concurrent abandonment of the “greater danger” principle, which viewed Great Russian chauvinism as more harmful than local nationalism, in his address to the 17th Party Congress in 1934 removed earlier hesitancy about the promotion of Rus-

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Spolsky (Ed.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*. Cambridge, 2012. Pp. 523–543; and Genovix Nana. *Medium of Instruction Policy and Multilingual Pupil’s Experience of Learning to Read and Write in Primary School in Cameroon* // Martin Solly and Edith Esch (Eds.). *Language Education and the Challenges of Globalization: Sociolinguistic Issues*. Cambridge, 2014. Pp. 33–53.

<sup>10</sup> I elaborate this argument in greater detail in Timothy Blauvelt. *From Words to Action! Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia, 1921–1939* // Stephen Jones (Ed.). *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918–2012: The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. London, 2014. P. 256.

<sup>11</sup> V. B. Kuraskua. *Abkhazskaia natsional’naia shkola (1921–1958)*. Sukhumi, 2003. P. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Yuri Slezkine. *The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism* // Sheila Fitzpatrick (Ed.). *Stalinism: New Directions*. London, 2014. P. 333.

sian language and culture.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the USSR between 1937 and 1939 Cyrillic scripts replaced the Latin ones that had been developed for local languages in the 1920s, and in 1938 Russian language became a mandatory subject in minority schools.<sup>14</sup> The Georgian SSR (and to some degree the Armenian SSR) were exceptions to these Russifying tendencies, which arguably reflected the particularly superior position of Georgia in the Soviet ethnic hierarchy during the Stalin period.<sup>15</sup> Not only were the official status of the Georgian and Armenian languages enshrined in their respective Soviet constitutions of 1937 and the use of their historical alphabets preserved, but the titular ethnicities now seemed to have been given clear dominance over the national minorities in their republics. The changing of Abkhazian place names to Georgianized ones had begun in 1936, and in 1937, again, at a time when Latin standards for minority languages all over the USSR were being converted to Cyrillic scripts, in the Georgian SSR the written Abkhaz language was converted from a Latin-based script to a Georgian-based one.<sup>16</sup> In 1939 a mass resettling of Georgian peasants into Abkhazia began, part of the collectivization project of constructing large state farms for tobacco, tea, and citrus fruit, dramatically altering the demographic makeup of Abkhazia in favor of Georgians. Similarly, Georgians now dominated party and government positions, although some Abkhazian elites remained in high positions (especially some associated with Beria's patronage network).<sup>17</sup> By the end of the Great Patriotic War, as Oleg Khlevniuk points out, the softer line of the post-purges and postwar period, combined with patronage support from the center, "enabled a growth of ambitions among Georgian leaders and untied their hands in dealing with a number of complex issues that should have demanded restraint and even-handedness," particularly with regard to ethnic minorities such as the Abkhaz.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Martin. *Affirmative Action Empire*. Pp. 361–2.

<sup>14</sup> Slezkine. *The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment*. P. 332.

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion about Georgia's privileged status during the Stalin period, see Timothy Blauvelt. *Status Shift and Ethnic Mobilization in the March 1956 Events in Georgia // Europe-Asia Studies*. 2009. Vol. 61. Pp. 651–668.

<sup>16</sup> Another indicative policy change was the conversion of the Latin script for the Ossetian language in South Ossetia to a new Georgian-based one, while the very same language in North Ossetia in the RSFSR was converted to a new Cyrillic-based script.

<sup>17</sup> See Blauvelt. *Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era*. Pp. 217–19.

<sup>18</sup> Oleg Khlevniuk. *Kremlin – Tbilisi: Purges, Control and Georgian Nationalism in the First Half of the 1950s // Timothy K. Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith (Eds.). Georgia after Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power*. London, 2015. P. 15.

### *The “Reorganization” of Abkhaz Schools*

It is in this context that the question of language of instruction for ethnic Abkhaz school children was raised in 1944. In the second half of that year, several Abkhazian pedagogues from regional schools sent letters of appeal to the Party Oblast Committee (Obkom) expressing concern about the difficulty that Abkhaz pupils faced in making the transition from instruction in Abkhazian in the first four grades to instruction in Russian for the subsequent grades. The pedagogues suggested introducing Georgian as the language of instruction from the first grade, and gradually expanding this to the following grades. Several of the letter writers were invited to the Obkom in the same year, together with other Abkhaz educational experts, to prepare a proposal for transitioning Abkhaz schools to instruction in Georgian. It is difficult to know whether these letters were submitted voluntarily and expressed the real concerns of the authors, or the authors were compelled to write them as a pretext for a policy direction on which the Obkom had already decided. Although the latter cannot be excluded, given that it was obvious by then which way the wind was blowing in the republic, it does seem possible that some Abkhaz pedagogues were genuinely interested in developing Georgian-language skills among their Abkhazian pupils.<sup>19</sup>

On January 9, 1945, the Bureau of the Abkhazian Obkom discussed a proposition “On activities for improving the quality of educational work in the schools of Abkhazia” and passed a resolution “To assign a commission composed of Comrades Delba M. (chairman), Sigua S. (Abkhazian Commissar of Education), Khubutia Sh. (head of the Obkom department for schools), A. Chochua (director of the Abkhazian Scientific Research Institute, Abnii), and I. Tuskadze (Abkhazian Obkom secretary for propaganda) to prepare and present in a month’s time for the consideration of the Abkhazian Obkom Bureau activities for improving the quality of educational work in the schools of Abkhazia.”<sup>20</sup> This committee reported that “from the total 9,179 Abkhaz pupils, only 60 of these are in the 10th grade. In the Ochamchire school, of the 18 pupils in the 10th grade only 7 are Abkhaz; in the Tamysh school only 1 of 7 is Abkhaz; and in the Adzyubzhi school there are no Abkhaz at all among the 12 pupils. The situation is similar in

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<sup>19</sup> Section II of the Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia (hereafter Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II)), formerly known as the Party Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia. F. 14. Op. 21. D. 298. L. 3–5.

<sup>20</sup> V. M. Pachuliya (Ed.). *Sovety Abkhazskoi ASSR v period Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny (1941–1945 gg.)*. Sukhumi, 1990. P. 116.

the other schools.”<sup>21</sup> Based on its analysis, the commission, not surprisingly, came to the conclusion that Abkhazian schools must switch to Georgian as the language of instruction.<sup>22</sup> On March 13, 1945, the Abkhazian Obkom decided to implement this recommendation:

With the goal of improving the quality of educational work in the schools of the Abkhazian ASSR, the preparation of qualified personnel from among ethnic Abkhaz, and in answer to the desires of the wide masses of the Abkhazian intelligentsia, the pupils themselves, and their parents, it is decided to halt the existing system of instruction in Abkhazian schools and, considering the presence of a shared alphabet and lexicological similarities between the Georgian and Abkhazian languages, the fact that a significant part of the Abkhaz people know Georgian, and the shared material and spiritual culture of the kindred Georgian and Abkhazian peoples, to transfer instruction in Abkhazian schools beginning in the 1945–46 school year to the Georgian language.<sup>23</sup>

On March 17, Mgeladze sent a report on the decision to the Georgian party first secretary K. N. Charkviani for confirmation. In the report he also requested the opening of Georgian pedagogical colleges (*uchilishcha*) in Gagra, Gudauta, Ochamchire, and Gali in order to prepare teachers and appealed to the Georgian Komsomol to mobilize youth from the regions of Georgia to attend these colleges. The Georgian Party Central Committee duly confirmed the directive on the “reorganization of Abkhaz schools” on June 13.<sup>24</sup> With the implementation of this “reorganization” in September 1945, many Abkhaz teachers were relieved of their positions (220 according to the Abkhaz historian Kuraskua) as they did not speak Georgian, and the number of schools in Abkhaz regions was reduced because of a lack of qualified personnel.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Mobilization of the Secret Police***

The implementation of the school “reorganization” was accompanied by an extensive campaign by the secret police (NKGB) to monitor public opinion among the ethnic Abkhaz, and particularly among intellectuals and pedagogues. On May 30, 1945, the commissar for State Security of

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<sup>21</sup> Pachuliya. *Sovety Abkhazskoi ASSR*. P. 116.

<sup>22</sup> *Sakartvelos shss arkivi* (II). F. 14. Op. 21. D. 298. L. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Pachuliya. *Sovety Abkhazskoi ASSR*. P. 117.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* P. 118.

<sup>25</sup> V. B. Kuraskua. *Abkhazskaia natsional’naia shkola* (1921–1958). P. 103.

the Abkhazian ASSR, I. Gagua, sent instructions to all the regional NKGB departments in Abkhazia to recruit and activate informants and to prepare for possible resistance:

At the request of progressive people from among the Abkhazian population, beginning with the 1945–46 school year in all Abkhazian primary schools it is proposed to introduce instruction in all subjects in the Georgian language, and the Abkhaz language will be taught as a subject only from the senior grades (from the 4th and 5th grades). For the implementation of this activity, the Peoples Commissariat of Education of the Abkhazian ASSR is conducting preparatory work: selection and assignment of teaching staff, provision of textbooks, etc.

In carrying out this activity, it is not excluded that certain anti-Soviet individuals, particularly the counterrevolutionary nationalist contingent of teachers and other intelligentsia from among the Abkhaz, will attempt to obstruct the successful implementation of this important state political activity. They will spread anti-Soviet and provocative rumors and in this way [seek to] halt and interfere, and perhaps create counterrevolutionary organizations with the goal of obstructing these activities.<sup>26</sup>

To counteract this, Gagua ordered his regional subordinates to study in detail the work of their Regional Departments for People's Education to ascertain the moods and conversations of teachers and pupils and other layers of the population through existing informant networks, and to recruit "from among the most devoted and trusted part of the teachers and intelligentsia" capable informants to "systematically observe how the work of Party and Soviet organs on this issue is going at the local level, of all anti-Soviet phenomena and activities, and also of insufficiencies [in implementation]."<sup>27</sup> More than 60 individuals were placed under intensive observation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Order of I. Gagua, May 20, 1945, No. 2/1/767, published in S. Z. Lakoba and Yu. D. Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv. XX vek. Vol. 1.* Moscow, 2003. Pp. 104–5. Although the Abkhazian state and party archives were burned in 1992 during the Georgian–Abkhazian war, part of the materials from the Abkhazian KGB archives have been preserved, and a number of them were published in this edition (a second volume has sadly not been forthcoming). A collection of documents relating to the Georgian–Abkhazian relationship was published in 1992 just before the war in B. E. Sagariia, T. A. Achugba, and V. M. Pachuliia (Eds.). *Abkhazii: dokumenty svidetel'stvuiut // Sukhumi*, 1992. Many of the party documents relating to Abkhazia existed in duplicate in the archive of the Georgian Communist Party (Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II)), including many cited in this article.

<sup>27</sup> Order of I. Gagua, May 20, 1945. P. 105.

<sup>28</sup> *Spravka nachal'nika 5-go odela MGB Abkh. ASSR, Podpolkovnika Ubilava*, April 5, 1946 // Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv.* P. 67.

***Reports of Resistance***

Subsequent NKGB reports reflect significant dissatisfaction, and seem to show an unprecedented expression of Abkhazian nationalist sentiment (invariably described as “counterrevolutionary and anti-Soviet chauvinism”). The Abkhaz author Mikhail A. Lakerbai told an informer, “As a writer, I am interested in strengthening the study of Abkhazian language and literature, but the things they are doing now, introducing Georgian language [in schools], bringing in Georgian cadres and others, are leading to the disappearance of Abkhazian language and literature, and of the Abkhaz altogether.”<sup>29</sup> Sh. Sh. Chitanava, head of the Abkhazian office of *Soiuzpechat*, was overheard saying: “Abkhaz children are lost. Now the majority will not study. It is becoming difficult for the Abkhaz to live in Abkhazia, we will have to leave. The Georgians are pressing us, and we do not have the right to educate our children in our native language.”<sup>30</sup>

A group of Abkhaz in leadership positions in Gudauta, including the head of the Trade Department, Gerasim Gunba, the People’s Court judge Firat Abukhba, and the head of the Regional Financial Department, Gerasim Tarba, held a conversation on the street that was reported to the NKGB (by informant “Svet”) in which they observed: “This introduction of teaching in Georgian is a bad idea, the methodology is unfounded; teaching in an incomprehensible language has no pedagogical basis and can only harm the children.”<sup>31</sup> The Gudauta regional assistant prosecutor Z. Kh. Tarkil stated in a conversation that “there is massive dissatisfaction in the countryside because of the introduction of instruction in Georgian.” And Colonel L. F. Golandziia, commander of the 407th rifle division then deployed in Akhali Aponi (Novyi Afon), said, “The local leading organs on their own initiative, without instructions or decisions from above closed the Abkhaz schools and introduced instruction in Georgian, and in this way caused dissatisfaction among the population.”<sup>32</sup> The Akhali Esheri teacher and party member A. K. Kogoniia said, “Though they say that every nationality can study in its native language, it’s not true. Lenin said this, but it’s no longer true. The Abkhaz will not have their own language.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv*. P. 133.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* P. 125.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* P. 135.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* P. 134.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* P. 125.

Much of the reported dissatisfaction with the changes in the schools touched on the larger issue of the subjugation of Abkhazian culture more generally, and the removal of Abkhaz teachers and other professionals from their jobs and their replacement by Georgians, which made conditions in the republic unlivable for the titular minority. A. R. Agrba, the former artistic director of the Abkhaz Drama Theater, reportedly stated: “You see they are closing the Abkhaz schools and they’re shipping Georgians into Abkhazia by the village load. The Georgians are simply colonizing Abkhazia. But one must keep silent. [Supreme Soviet Presidium Chairman M. K. Delba] keeps silent, so it means that nothing can be done.”<sup>34</sup>

The Akhali Aponi school director and party member B. P. Avidzba said, “Any fool can predict that sooner or later there will be no more Abkhaz schools. There are no conditions for us. Who of us remains, speaking among ourselves? Things have become difficult.”

The recently sacked former head of the Gudauta Agricultural Technical School, K. U. Grigolia, asked:

Where can we work? There are no places for us Abkhaz in Gudauta.

M. F. Kvarcheliia was sacked as the director of the Abkhaz school because he doesn’t have a higher education, but I do have higher education and I worked for ten years as the director of the Technical School, so why did they remove me?<sup>35</sup>

A Gudauta resident, Murusat Avidzba, who kept his son from going to school in protest, stated, “The Georgians want our nation to not exist, that there will be no Abkhazia, only Georgia; they don’t teach us our language, and why do we need a foreign language?”<sup>36</sup> And the combine director I. I. Guliia said, “They have deprived us Abkhaz of our language. Why did they do this? Why do they not allow us to live in Abkhazia?”<sup>37</sup> The head of the Gudauta Regional Trade Office G. M. Gumba “spread provocative rumors” by stating that “the Gudauta Regional Committee secretary Janjgava instructed that compromising materials be gathered on Executive Committee chairman D. K. Cherkeziia and his relatives; this is how they are preparing the ground in order to remove all of the Abkhaz from their jobs.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. P. 131.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. P. 109; Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 19. D. 200. L. 147.

<sup>36</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). Abkhazskii arkhiv. P. 111; Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 19. D. 200. L. 146.

<sup>37</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). Abkhazskii arkhiv. P. 134.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. P. 107.

The NKGB reports also illustrate the ways in which implementation of the policy was resisted on the local level, first of all by educational officials and school directors. N. E. Geriia, the deputy commissar for education of the Abkhazian ASSR, was sent to the Ochamchire district to conduct preparatory work, but “he pretended to be sick and did not go, and does not undertake efforts to fulfill his tasks.”<sup>39</sup> Geriia was subsequently sacked, which he ascribed to his Abkhaz nationality: “They simply didn’t want to keep me on as an Abkhaz, so they sacked me.”<sup>40</sup> Some school directors sought means to extricate themselves from the situation: the Lykhny school director G. A. Zvanbaia was reported to have refused to carry out explanatory work about the transition to Georgian, which resulted in an exodus of pupils from the school; he then attempted to resign from his position, saying that the Abkhaz might kill him if he remained.<sup>41</sup> The Duripshi school director Vera Tarba tried to prevent the change to teaching in Georgian, “categorically refusing to accept Georgian teachers with higher education in exchange for the current Abkhaz teachers with only secondary education.”<sup>42</sup> T. K. Agrba, the director of the Kaldakhvani Abkhaz school and a party member, said that because of the policies, “I have to leave my position, because the pupils will not come to school and all of the blame will fall on me.”<sup>43</sup> The Dzhivkhvin School no. 1 director R. D. Gunba “intentionally dragged out the procurement of Georgian textbooks, by which means he sabotaged [*sryval*] the work of the school.”<sup>44</sup> According to an informant codenamed “Sukhumskii,” nearly all of the school directors in the Ochamchire region neglected to purchase the necessary Georgian textbooks, even though they had unspent resources on hand.<sup>45</sup>

Many Abkhaz simply kept their children from going to school, a form of resistance that was closely monitored and reported on by the NKGB. The director of the Baklanovskaia school, named Kutikidi, stated that she would not send her daughter to study in a Georgian sector, as “this activity is not a useful policy.”<sup>46</sup> The collective farm member Dzhir Avidzba said, “I’ll show you how they physically punish kids for not mastering Georgian; I’m not

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. P. 124.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. P. 130.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. P. 106.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. P. 107; Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 19. D. 200. L. 146.

<sup>43</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). Abkhazskii arkhiv. P. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. P. 136.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. P. 136.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. P. 107.

sending my kids to school anymore, let them sit at home.”<sup>47</sup> Another collective farm worker, Khushuna Zarandiia, said, “What will studying Georgian give them? Better that my children grind corn.” And another, Kiskindzh Adleiba, stated that he sent one son to work in a tea factory and another to be a shepherd, as “there is no sense in educating them in Georgian.”<sup>48</sup> And a third, Andrei Tigovich Shoniia, refused to send one of his sons to school, stating, “What is studying Georgian good for, what will it give me? He won’t be able to get employment in Tbilisi, better to let him work here at home with me.”<sup>49</sup> A special report, “On incidents of nonattendance by pupils of certain schools of the Ochemchire region,” detailing the attendance records of first- to fourth-grade children who “systematically” skipped school, was sent by the Abkhazian NKGB to the Obkom secretary in November 1945. According to this report, nonattendance had reached “mass” levels. Some of the children stated that they did not want to study in Georgian and wanted to go to Russian school, and others said that they did not attend school because they lacked clothing and shoes.<sup>50</sup>

### *Appeals to the Center*

The closing of the Abkhaz schools was the principal complaint when protest took a more active form, in the letter of three young Abkhaz intellectuals (all three were candidates of sciences) and party members, G. A. Dzidzariia, B. B. Shinkuba, and K. S. Shakryl, sent to the Central Committee in Moscow in February 1947 and addressed to Central Committee Secretary A. A. Kuznetsov. Viewed later as a founding moment in the modern Abkhaz national movement, the appeal used the regime’s own discourse to outline how the situation in Abkhazia “fundamentally contradicts and distorts the nationalities policy of our Bolshevik Party and of Soviet power.” The authors argued that the school “reorganization” (they put the word in quotation marks) took place in secret and was announced publicly only in an article by M. I. Delba (and published only in Abkhaz in the newspaper *Aspny kapsh*) in November 1946, more than a year after the fact. Georgian teachers were being brought in from all over Georgia, while many of the local Abkhaz teachers “found themselves outside of the school walls.” The overall number

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. P. 135.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. P. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. P. 136.

<sup>50</sup> Spets. soobshchenie o faktakh neposeshcheniia uchashchimisia nekotorykh shkol Ochemchirskogo raiona // Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). Abkhazskii arkhiv. Pp. 145–8. 208

of Abkhaz schools was sharply reduced, and one of the oldest and most prestigious, the Sukhumi school, was closed and turned into a Georgian boys' school, thus "depriving urban Abkhaz children of the opportunity to study their native tongue, even as a subject." In the beginning of the first year of the "reorganization," the authors claim, Abkhaz children were prohibited from going to Russian schools. They describe how an Abkhazian teacher appealed to the Soviet head of state M. I. Kalinin about this in 1946, and was subsequently arrested and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for "spreading false information," even though the director of the local Russian school showed in court the official instructions that Abkhaz children may not be accepted into Russian schools. The authors went on to complain that the study of Abkhaz language and literature did not meet appropriate standards as a result of the changes; that Abkhazian teachers were not being trained; and that Abkhaz pedagogical institutions were being fused with Georgian ones. Following this longest section on the school issue, the authors then enumerated several other complaints, such as the poor state of Abkhaz newspapers, radio broadcasts, the Union of Writers, and arts ensembles, about the renaming of places, streets, and theaters from Abkhaz to Georgian, and about the lack of Abkhaz cadres in responsible positions while at the same time cadres from Georgia were being "mobilized" and imported.<sup>51</sup>

The authors of this letter were sufficiently reputable (and perhaps their connections in Moscow sufficiently noteworthy) that the Georgian Central Committee in Tbilisi was forced to take the letter seriously, and to send the secretary for ideology, P. Sharia, to Sukhumi to "investigate" the situation. In his report to Georgian Party First Secretary Charkviani, Sharia challenged many of the points of the letter. Instead of being done in secret, Sharia argued that the initiative for the language change came from Abkhaz pedagogues themselves; that the preparatory committee headed by M. I. Delba interviewed Abkhaz teachers, members of the "urban intelligentsia" and of collective farms, and also pupils in Abkhazia; and that regional conferences had been held in Ochamchire and Gudauta for "explanatory work" among the local population.<sup>52</sup> Sharia argued that no Abkhaz teachers with at least minimal qualifications had lost their positions because of the "reorganization," only 119 teachers who lacked pedagogical or even secondary educations had been removed; and he asserted that the allegation that the policy resulted

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<sup>51</sup> The handwritten original of this letter is in Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 21. D. 298. L. 53–66; it has been published in I. Marykhuba (Ed.). *Abkhazskie pis'ma (1947–1989)*. Sbornik dokumentov. Vol. 1. Nalchik, 1994. Pp. 81–87.

<sup>52</sup> Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 21. D. 298. L. 2.

in a reduction in the number of Abkhaz schools was similarly unfounded.<sup>53</sup> To the letter writers' contention that Abkhaz children were prevented from going to Russian schools, an accusation that Sharia described as "monstrous" (*chudovishchnoe*), he reported that the instruction described in court had been misinterpreted, and that 2,081 Abkhaz children, 1,445 Georgian children, and 1,293 Armenian children were currently studying in Russian schools in Abkhazia.<sup>54</sup> In an informational note attached to the report, the Abkhazian minister of education S. Sigua wrote that "children and school-aged adolescents are fully able to attend any of the indicated schools [in Abkhaz, Georgian, Russian, or Armenian] ... there are no restrictions in attending Russian or other schools."<sup>55</sup> Sharia went on to attempt to counter the claims that the level of teaching of Abkhaz language and culture was subpar, that insufficient textbooks were being provided, and that Abkhaz teaching staff were not being properly prepared, as well as the authors' assertions regarding other issues.<sup>56</sup> In his conclusion, Sharia suggested the authors should be excluded from the party, but because they were among the very few Abkhaz scientific-pedagogical cadres and because they supposedly partially admitted their mistakes, he recommended that the punishment be limited to a severe party reprimand.<sup>57</sup>

The same file contains a brief letter, dated August 2, 1947, in which the three authors of the 1947 letter to the Central Committee allegedly retracted their statement that the situation represented "a fundamental violation of nationality policy." Rather than considering the "reorganization" of schools unnecessary, they now felt only that it had been implemented too harshly.<sup>58</sup> Decades later, in 1991, one of the authors, K. S. Shakryl, wrote that he had never been aware of the existence of this "apologetic letter" and held that his signature on it was forged.<sup>59</sup>

In May 1951, perhaps in connection with Stalin's intervention in the "Linguistic Discussion" in 1950 in which N. Ia. Marr's "Jephetic Theory" linking the Georgian (Kartvelian) languages to the Semitic family of the Middle East was denounced in favor of A. Chikobava's "Comparative-historical"

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. L. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. L. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. L. 23–4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. L. 4–6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. L. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. L. 50–51.

<sup>59</sup> Vzgljad. No. 4. October 1991. P. 1; Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv*. Pp. 87–90.

method that sought, in part, to demonstrate the origins of the Caucasian languages in proto-Georgian,<sup>60</sup> the Abkhazian Obkom first secretary Mgeladze sent a report to the Georgian first secretary Charkviani on May 14, 1951, detailing the presumed motivations of Shakryl in 1947. Shakryl was close to “the former enemy leadership of the Abkhazian ASSR, of N. Lakoba and his company, and is from the same village as Lakoba (of Lykhny).” He was closely linked with the now denounced professor G. P. Serdiuchenko, “a devoted ally of Marr and an anti-Marxist in the field of linguistics” whose scientific thesis centered around the particularities of the Abkhaz language.<sup>61</sup> Shakryl, presumably through Serdiuchenko, was also linked to the former Central Committee secretary A. A. Kuznetsov, which allegedly explains why the 1947 letter was addressed to him (Kuznetsov had since been convicted as an enemy of the people in the “Leningrad Affair” and was executed in September 1950). After the “unmasking” (*razoblachenie*) of his “group,” in 1949 Shakryl relocated to Moscow, where he remained in contact with Serdiuchenko.<sup>62</sup> In separate letters in the same file addressed to Charkviani, dated several days earlier, both of the other two authors of the 1947 letter, Dzindzariia and Shinkuba, repeated their earlier repentance and admission of error, maintained that they had had no contact with Shakryl, and asserted that Serdiuchenko had encouraged them to make use of the connection with Kuznetsov to submit the original letter in 1947.<sup>63</sup>

A shakeup of the Georgian leadership took place in the spring of 1952, part of the so-called Mingrelian Affair, in which the Georgian first secretary Charkviani was replaced in that position by Mgeladze, the former Abkhazian Obkom first secretary.<sup>64</sup> The sisters Ekaterina P. and Tamara P. Shakryl, nieces of K. S. Shakryl, then graduate students at the Institute of Language and Thought in Moscow (the former stronghold of the Marrists), hand-delivered letters personally to Stalin and to Malenkov in early November 1952 in the wake of the 19th Party Congress. In these letters, the Shakryl sisters repeated earlier complaints about “serious distortions of Soviet policy in the nationalities issue” resulting from the closing of Abkhaz schools and inattention to Abkhaz language and culture. To this they added that the change had negatively affected Russian-language learning among the Abkhaz: “Russian

<sup>60</sup> See Ethan Pollock. *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars*. Princeton, 2006. Pp. 106–116.

<sup>61</sup> *Sakartvelos shss arkivi* (II). F. 14. Op. 26. D. 380. L. 50.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* L. 51–3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* L. 54–7.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy K. Blauvelt. *Beria’s Patronage Network and Soviet Crypto Politics // Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 2011. Vol. 30. Pp. 12–13.

for the Abkhaz, as for all peoples of the USSR, is a second native language; the teaching of Russian as a subject [before the reform] up to the 5th grade allowed it to be mastered to such a degree that it was already possible to transition from the 5th grade to instruction in Russian.”<sup>65</sup> This system had been effective, and the switch to instruction entirely in Georgian following the war had, contrary to official claims, been detrimental to the work of the schools and for the preparation of qualified Abkhaz personnel. Even six years after the introduction of the reform, Abkhaz children started school with no knowledge of Georgian at all: “At home, at preschool age, if they learn any nonnative language at all, it is of course not Georgian but Russian. Therefore usually the pupils do not understand the lesson as explained to them in Georgian, so the teacher is almost always forced to repeat it in broken Russian; sometimes the Abkhaz pupils speak Russian better than their teachers.”<sup>66</sup> The authors repeated complaints from children that they were forced to memorize answers in Georgian without understanding the content, and worse: “In many of the villages of Abkhazia there are no Russian schools or native-language schools at all,” thus leaving many Abkhaz children with no option but to study in Georgian, which they did not understand. They then criticized the removal of the Abkhaz language as a subject in the 9th–11th grades, the closing of Abkhaz pedagogical institutes, the ceasing of Abkhaz textbook publication, and the minimal amount of publishing of Abkhaz literature. Even in the Abkhaz literature that was published, they asserted, efforts were made to replace borrowed Russian words with newly formed Georgian-based borrowed words. All these “activities,” they argued, comprised attempts of the leadership to prove the false premise that the Abkhaz and the Georgians were one nation, and they challenged this premise by citing Stalin’s listing of Abkhaz and Georgian as separate languages of the Caucasus (from his 1918 article “Counterrevolutionaries of the Transcaucasus behind the Mask of Socialism”). They concluded by appealing to Stalin (and Malenkov) to take measures to “liquidate these distortions that have become so strongly embedded, in part, by the former Georgian Party Central Committee [First] Secretary Charkviani,” and they also asked that the letter not be forwarded to the Georgian leadership in Tbilisi, “as such appeals to them have never brought positive results, and those who appeal to the Central Committee [in Moscow] have been subjected to repressions by the Georgian central organizations; it must be said that the current [First]

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<sup>65</sup> Marykhuba (Ed.). *Abkhazskie pis'ma*. P. 90.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* P. 91.

Secretary of the Georgian Party Central Committee [i.e., Mgeladze] was until recently the secretary of the Party Obkom in Abkhazia and, of course, was aware of everything that happened but made no efforts to correct things.”<sup>67</sup>

This letter apparently attracted the attention of Malenkov at least, and shortly afterward, on December 4, 1952, Mgeladze, now in his new position in Tbilisi as first secretary of the Georgian Party Central Committee, was once again compelled to defend the policy in Abkhazia in a detailed report (*dokladnaia zapiska*) addressed personally to Stalin.<sup>68</sup> Mgeladze began by rehearsing the earlier arguments about the lack of preparedness of Abkhaz children under the previous system of four grades in Abkhaz and then switching to Russian or Georgian, resulting in a deficit of educated Abkhaz cadres. In Lakoba’s time, he wrote, ethnic Abkhaz were promoted (*vydvigali*) to the leadership positions, with Georgians as their deputies. “The absolute majority of these Abkhaz were completely illiterate, and couldn’t even sign their names.”<sup>69</sup> Close examination of this situation revealed, he averred, that this situation resulted from flaws in the early educational system and the barrier caused by switching from one language to another after the fourth grade. He went on to argue that continuing instruction in the more senior grades in Abkhaz schools in the Abkhaz language was impossible because of the “undeveloped nature” of the language and its deficit of scientific terminology. “It is well-known,” Mgeladze held, “that the possibilities for word formation in Abkhaz are extremely limited, and because of the particularities of this language and of the existing vocabulary the formation of new words is an extremely difficult process . . . [making] it ill-equipped for the expression of the great diversity of modern scientific concepts.” The impossibility and pointlessness of educating children in Abkhaz had long been clear, “but the bourgeois-nationalist group headed by Lakoba that ran amok for so long in Abkhazia dragged education down this path, and in so doing hampered its development.”<sup>70</sup> Not a single Abkhaz who graduated from Abkhaz schools could receive a higher education, occupy a leadership post, or become a scientific specialist, Mgeladze maintained. “This is not a random phenomenon: in Abkhaz schools the children, one can say directly, were not taught, but were maimed [*kalechili*].”<sup>71</sup> After presenting a list of cognate words in Georgian and Abkhaz to illustrate the supposed proximity

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* P. 92.

<sup>68</sup> Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 26. D. 380. L. 13–22.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* L. 15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* L. 15.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* L. 18.

of the two languages, Mgeladze asserted, using catchwords from Stalin's canonical definition of nationality, that "the political, economic, and cultural lives of the Abkhaz and the Georgians over the course of many centuries have flowed, as is known, in conditions of united struggle for independence against the countless invasions of Turko-Persian conquerors. Abkhazia from ancient times has been an inseparable part of Georgia; the Georgian language, in fact, is the state language of Abkhazia."<sup>72</sup> Mgeladze concluded by pointing out that the number of hours of Russian language and literature in the curriculum in Abkhazia had increased, in part because of the addition of an 11th grade.

Seven years of work of the Abkhaz schools in the new conditions have entirely affirmed the vitality and appropriateness of the transfer of instruction to the Georgian language. It has allowed for many qualified pedagogues to be sent to Abkhaz schools, of textbooks to be provided to the pupils, and for methodological training and quality control to be greatly strengthened. The quality of study and of academic accomplishment of the pupils has increased. Practice has shown that Abkhaz children easily and rapidly master not only Georgian but also academic disciplines taught in this language. A quality pedagogical approach has been instilled in the Abkhaz schools that matches the state educational program, and the schools have begun to graduate youth who are prepared to continue on to higher educational institutions. At present there are more than 300 Abkhaz studying in universities and technical colleges in the Georgian SSR, including 85 in Tbilisi State University, while in 1944–45 there was not a single Abkhaz student in this university. Thus we are fully able to educate the Abkhaz youth at the secondary and postsecondary level. Following this path, in 3–4 years we will have a sufficient number of qualified cadres from among the Abkhaz. ... We consider the transfer of instruction in Abkhaz schools to the Georgian language to be the only correct resolution to the problem, and to have entirely justified itself. ... All of the masses of the Abkhaz approve of and decisively support this activity, seeing it as the only correct decision, giving the Abkhaz youth the possibility to receive secondary and higher education.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. L. 20.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. L. 21–22. Supporting information for Mgeladze's letter was provided several days earlier, in a *dokladnaia zapiska* addressed to him on November 28 by the Georgian SSR education minister V. Kupradze and the Abkhazian ASSR education minister S. Sigua (Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 26. D. 380. L. 23–4).

The fact that Mgeladze felt the need to justify the policy to Malenkov and Stalin perhaps demonstrates certain limits to the spheres of action allowed to Georgian officials vis-à-vis the Abkhaz. The effort devoted to refuting the claims of the 1947 letter of Dzidzariia, Shinkuba, and Shakryl also hints at this, as does the concern for the authors' connections to Moscow patronage networks and the light punishment that they received. Much of the NKGB reporting of rumors and statements seems also to reflect anxiety on the part of the Georgian leadership toward the remaining patronage connections of the Abkhaz intellectuals in the center, and the sense of the Abkhaz that the Georgian leaders' free reins in Abkhazia would sooner or later be "noticed" in Moscow and curtailed. The Lykhny school Georgian-language teacher S. M. Pipia was reported to have stated that Abkhaz teachers describe this as a temporary phenomenon that will be reversed in the near future.<sup>74</sup> The Lykhny school director reportedly said, "In time, sooner or later, somebody from the center, from Moscow, will notice, and will inform on the Georgians [*stuknet po gruzinam*], all of this is coming from the current rulers of Abkhazia, who hate the Abkhaz."<sup>75</sup> A police report of April 5, 1947, expressed particular concern about an Abkhazian Obkom lecturer named A. K. Adleiba who met with other Abkhaz intellectuals while in Moscow "and began to discuss in a critical fashion the activities conducted in the Abkhazian ASSR."<sup>76</sup> The aforementioned Lt. Colonel Golandziia was reported again to the Abkhazian Obkom (this time directly by two of his interlocutors) to have spoken his mind freely, in this case in the presence of visiting Guard General-Lieutenant I. L. Khishniak:

In Abkhazia the local leadership, without agreement or permission from above, closed all the Abkhaz schools and now teaching is done in Georgian. I am often in the villages and I know what the Abkhaz say there, that our nation is dying off, we have only 5–6 years left to exist, and there are no more Abkhaz schools. They don't know about this in Moscow, and when they find out, then they will harshly punish the local leadership ... it's an aggressive Georgification of Abkhazia. I've written to Moscow about this, and I will certainly write again. All of this contradicts the nationality policy of our party, all of this is an expression of Georgian chauvinism.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv*. P. 107.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* P. 107; *Sakartvelos shss arkivi* (II). F. 14. Op. 19. D. 200. L. 146.

<sup>76</sup> Lakoba and Anchabadze (Eds.). *Abkhazskii arkhiv*. P. 70.

<sup>77</sup> *Sakartvelos shss arkivi* (II). F. 14. Op. 19. D. 210. L. 193.

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Following the death of Stalin and then the arrest of Beria in the spring of 1953, the situation of the Abkhaz changed rapidly. In August 1953 the Central Committee sent a commission to Georgia to investigate the function of schools, higher educational institutions, and newspapers in the republic. This commission was harshly critical of the situation in the schools in Abkhazia, where the pupils and many parents went on strike on the first day of the 1953–54 school year, demanding to be allowed to study in Russian. On the recommendations of the commission, Russian-language instruction was organized immediately in schools beginning October 1.<sup>78</sup> Despite resistance from the Georgian leadership in Tbilisi, gradually over the succeeding years the titular Abkhaz regained their position in the autonomous republic.

The first goal of this article has been to show that the educational “re-organization” and the other policies of Georgification in Abkhazia in the postwar period were the result of a combination of factors: the change in Soviet nationality policy more generally to emphasize the privileges of the larger nations at the expense of the smaller ones, at the same time that the Abkhaz, given their diaspora element, were particularly vulnerable;<sup>79</sup> the extensive destruction in the 1937 purges of the previously entrenched ethnically Abkhaz patronage network based around Nestor Lakoba; and the consolidation of a dynamic Georgian patronage network in Abkhazia, based around A. I. Mgeladze with direct support from Stalin,<sup>80</sup> that understood its mission as primarily one of Georgification and assimilation. By the postwar and high Stalinist period this Georgian network with an ethnonationalist agenda had achieved almost total “capture” of the coercive institutions of the party and state at a time when the direction of nationality policy clearly favored this direction. That the language of primary school education became both the target for the Georgian leadership and the rallying point for Abkhaz resistance was not coincidental. By the Stalin period, language had become a primary marker of national identity, whether it was actively used in practice or not. The second goal of the article has been to show how policies about language and education in Abkhazia took on a larger significance for the Abkhaz themselves, who in the longer perspective viewed these policies as an attempt to challenge the tenets of Abkhaz identity. Given their position

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<sup>78</sup> Khlevniuk. *Kremlin – Tbilisi*. Pp. 56–57.

<sup>79</sup> I make the argument of the Abkhaz as a “diaspora nation” in a more detailed form in Blauvelt. *From Words to Action*. Pp. 257–58.

<sup>80</sup> On Stalin’s use of Mgeladze and his network in order to balance that of Beria, see Blauvelt. *Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era*. Pp. 219–22.

and opportunities, the Abkhaz had never emphasized the use of their own language beyond the symbolic (and this included schooling in Abkhaz, as the majority of Abkhaz children, especially those living in the towns, did not study in Abkhaz schools to begin with). Yet the restrictions on its use in primary education were understood by most as an attack on the existence of the Abkhaz as a nation and on their rights and privileges as the titular nationality in the autonomous republic.

Yet despite the purges of their previous elites and their precarious position as a small and “suspect” nation, the Abkhaz were nevertheless able either to make the best of the situation or to offer resistance to these policies in various ways. Some Abkhaz intellectuals and politicians saw the advantage to cooperating with the Georgian leadership, and in so doing were able to retain or improve their positions. Some of these appear to have internalized the official justifications of the policies (for example, the letter of T. Chochua regarding the statements of Lt. Colonel Golandziia).<sup>81</sup> The Georgian leadership clearly relied heavily on “trusted and devoted” segments of the Abkhaz professional elite for support in implementation and in providing informant information. Many Abkhaz at different levels were able to resist the policies and their implementation through various means. Many made use of the usual “weapons of the weak”: school directors and teachers dragged their feet in carrying out the changes; parents sent their children to different schools if possible or, if not, kept them home or sent them to do other work; and for some, exit was an option – moving to Russia or other parts of the USSR to find better work and educational opportunities. Other Abkhaz, particularly those in the party and state elite, were able to use their patronage connections to make appeals and to seek protection from retribution. Despite the obliteration of the Lakoba network, many such Abkhaz elites still maintained impressive links in the Soviet imperial center. As I have argued elsewhere, Abkhazia during the Stalin period became an ideal spot for cultivating patronage connections, given its geographical position as a Black Sea playground for the Soviet elite. The resulting potential of Abkhazia for providing personal political capital was one of the factors that made it such a prize for Beria and his group in 1937–1943; it also lent substantial authority to Mgeladze and his group from his appointment there as first secretary in 1943 until Stalin’s death in 1954. Abkhaz intellectuals such as Shakryl and his nieces clearly had similarly expansive access in Moscow, and the Georgian leadership was forced to reckon with this and to measure their response.

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<sup>81</sup> Sakartvelos shss arkivi (II). F. 14. Op. 26. D. 380. L. 195–96.

In the end, though, Stalin himself was the ultimate arbiter of the situation, and even when appeals attracted the attention of Politburo elites he continued to support Mgeladze and the Georgians on this issue. The policies were only reversed with Stalin's death and the subsequent unraveling of the Caucasian networks (of both Beria and Mgeladze). This struggle over the language of education, and by extension, of identity and existence, would continue to hold a central place in the increasingly venomous exchanges between the Abkhaz and Georgian elites and ethnic entrepreneurs for decades to come, and given the ethnicized nature of politics from this time, it would be viewed as an indication of the intentions and desires of both sides. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that this conflict over language education was in fact an early volley in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict of the early 1990s.

## SUMMARY

From the 1945–46 school year until the end of the Stalin period, the leadership of the Georgian SSR decreed the closing of Abkhazian schools and the substitution of Georgian for Abkhaz as the language of instruction for Abkhaz pupils in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic. Given the significance of titular language as a category of national identification in Soviet nationality policy, this change in educational policy for the autonomous republic came to be viewed by the Abkhaz as an attack on both the “content” and “form” of their national identity. It would occupy a central place in the Abkhaz narrative of grievances toward the Georgian authorities for decades to follow. Based on Georgian party archival sources and on published Georgian and Abkhazian secret police reports, this article first examines the factors involved in the decision making leading to the policy, and then assesses how the Abkhaz interpreted and reacted to it.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

Начиная с осени 1945 г. и до конца сталинского периода по распоряжению руководства Грузинской ССР были закрыты абхазские школы в Абхазской автономной социалистической республике, а вместо абхазского в преподавание вводился грузинский язык. С учетом важности титульного языка для национальной идентификации в советской системе нациестроительства, подобные изменения в сфере образования

в автономной республике рассматривались как атака на “содержание” и “форму” национальной идентичности абхазов. На протяжении последующих десятилетий этот эпизод играл центральную роль в абхазском нарративе притеснений со стороны грузинских властей. В настоящей статье автор реконструирует предысторию этой политики грузинских властей и реакцию на нее в Абхазии. Исследование опирается на материалы грузинских архивов и на опубликованные отчеты грузинских и абхазских органов НКВД.