

THE CAUCASUS

AN OVERVIEW

by

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Whoever loses homeland loses all (Abkhazian proverb)

The northern Caucasus, currently part of the Russian Federation, plus the newly independent Transcaucasian republics are home to speakers of over 50 languages. Some are obvious immigrants: Indo-European speaking Armenians, Greeks, Ossetes (isolated in the centre of the main range, their language is cousin to Persian and Kurdish, which is also attested in Georgia and Armenia), Gypsies and, naturally, Slavs (Russians and Ukrainians); Turkic speaking Azerbaijanis, Kumyks (in the NE), Karachay-Balkars (in the NW) and Nogais.

The indigenous peoples themselves speak upto 40 languages that fall into three families: the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) family is centred on Georgia but extends into Turkey, where both Georgians and virtually the entire Laz community reside -- within Georgia there live upto 3 million ethnic Georgians, perhaps 750,000 Mingrelians and around 50,000 Svans, all of whom (plus a tiny number of Laz) have been officially classified since circa 1930 as 'Georgians', producing a total Kartvelian population for the last Soviet census (1989) of 3,787,393; from the North West Caucasian family the 100,000 Abkhazians live in sub-tropical Abkhazia between the Black Sea and the southern slopes of the main chain, whilst their cousins, the 28,000 Abazinians and half-million Circassians, live over the mountains; the North East Caucasian family has a number of sub-divisions: east of the (North) Ossetians are the Ingush and their close relatives, the Chechens, most of whose 1989 1 million population were settled in and around Chechenia, whilst the remaining tribes, who may number from under 1,000 with their language restricted to a mere handful of isolated villages (such as the Archi) to the most populous Lezgians and Avars (each over half a million), are largely confined to the rugged mountains of Daghestan (bordering the Caspian), though some inhabit both northern Azerbaijan and eastern Georgia.

Kartvelians, apart from the Laz and the Georgians of Ajaria (bordering Turkey) or Zakatala (in Azerbaijan), who are Muslim, are Orthodox Christians. Islam came early to Daghestan in the 8-9th centuries, from where it was relatively recently (16-19th centuries) adopted by the Chechens and Ingush, for both of whom it remains an

essential component of their self-identity. The activities of the Ottoman Turks along the eastern coast of the Black Sea from the 16th century introduced Islam to locals who had hitherto been superficially Christian. However, religion today plays little role in the lives of North West Caucasians (particularly Abkhazians) still domiciled in the Caucasus, be they nominally Christian or Muslim -- indeed, all over the Caucasus one finds remnants of pagan beliefs intermingled with these younger mythologies. Despite what certain Georgian and Russian propagandists may scream in paranoid American ears, religion has no relevance to their conflicts with Abkhazians and Chechens, respectively.

Despite millennia of dalliance in the region by outside-powers (colonising Greeks or imperial Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, Mongols, and Russians), the seeds of the present conflicts lie in relatively recent history. Kartvelian speaking lands had fragmented into separate, often mutually hostile kingdoms and princedoms after the Mongol invasions and were frequently ravaged by Ottomans or Persians. With little option but to ally with fellow-Orthodox Russia, Georgia's eastern kingdoms were annexed in 1801, which gave the Tsars their first toe-hold in Transcaucasia -- by 1830 Russia also controlled roughly those territories which were later to form the republics of Armenia (Orthodox Christian) and Azerbaijan (predominantly Shi'a Muslim). Mingrelia followed in 1803, and the western province of Imereti(a) in 1804. Significantly, Abkhazia came under Russian protection only in 1810, both Abkhazia and Mingrelia continuing to administer their own affairs until 1864 and 1857, respectively.

In the North Caucasus only Orthodox Ossetia, linked to Georgia by the Georgian Military Highway, was friendly. Most of the 19th century was devoted to a bloody campaign to conquer the mountaineers that left land devastated and peoples decimated. After Shamil's surrender in Daghestan in 1859, it took a further five years to quash north-western resistance -- Shamil had relied heavily on the Chechens, whose implacable anti-Russianism was honed by the savagery they and their cherished forests then suffered. The entire Ubykh nation, centred around Sochi, plus most Circassians and Abkhazians (who alone of the Transcaucasians had fought against Russia's imperial drive southwards) and also representatives of many other north Caucasian peoples decamped to Ottoman lands. The consequence is that today a north Caucasian diaspora runs from Kosovo to Jordan; most live in Turkey, where vastly more Circassians and Abkhazians are located than in their Caucasian homeland.

The depopulated North West Caucasian territories were now ripe for immigration. Slavs began to settle Circassian (and other north Caucasian) lands, resulting in the 95,439 West Circassians living in 1989 in the then Adyghe Autonomous Region (capital Maykop) representing a mere 22% of the population. Even after Abkhazia's malarial swamps were drained, the main inflow came from neighbouring Mingrelia. During the three years of Transcaucasian independence following the October Revolution, Georgian troops brutally occupied Abkhazia -- the English [sic] traveller Carl Bechhofer gave this contemporary assessment of Georgia's Menshevik government (1918-1921): 'The free and independent Social-Democratic government of Georgia will ever remain in my memory as a classical example of an imperialistic minor nationality both in relation to its seizure of territory to within its own borders and in relation to the bureaucratic tyranny inside the state. Its chauvinism exceeds the highest limits'.

Soviet power came to Transcaucasia in 1921, and Abkhazia emerged as a full Union Republic (albeit with special treaty-ties to Georgia), enshrined in its 1925 constitution. Two Armenian dominated areas were assigned to Azerbaijan: Nagorno-Karabagh and Nakhichevan, even though this latter is physically separated from Azerbaijan by Armenia -- by 1989 virtually no Armenians lived in Nakhichevan. Azerbaijan also acquired the Zakatala district, where Muslim Georgian Ingilos live. In 1931 Ioseb Dzhughashvili (alias Stalin), reduced Abkhazia's status to that of an autonomous republic within his native Georgia, and the new head of Georgia's Communist Party, a young Mingrelian from Abkhazia called Lavrenti Beria, soon devised a plan to 'Kartvelianise' Abkhazia. After personally poisoning the Abkhazian leader, Nestor Lakoba, in 1936, Beria began a forced transfer of population (largely from Mingrelia, but also including Armenians, Russians and some Georgians) into Abkhazia to swamp the Abkhazians on their home-soil -- in 1989 Abkhazians represented a mere 17.8% of Abkhazia's population, against 45.7% (239,872) Kartvelians. After Beria's transfer to Moscow in 1938, anti-Abkhazian measures continued under his (Svan) successor, Kandid Charkviani. A new Abkhaz script was devised with Georgian characters; subsequently, from 1945, Abkhaz schools were replaced by Georgian ones, and publication in Abkhaz ceased. But assimilation of the Abkhazians failed, Stalin and Beria mercifully dying in 1953. Abkhazian schools reopened, and publications restarted with a different script. In compensation for the repression, ethnic Abkhazians were allowed over-representation in local offices -- little more than a meaningless sop, since Tbilisi still took all important decisions; this was, however, to provide ammunition for nationalist demagogues, enabling them to make a superficially plausible case for anti-Kartvelian discrimination.

The North Caucasus too underwent changes. An early Soviet Mountain Republic was divided and re-divided into various administrative units, sometimes fluctuating in status between 'autonomous republic' and 'autonomous region'. The Karachay-Balkar speech-community, for instance, was split, as were the East Circassian Cherkess-Kabardians to form the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Republic and (eventually in the late 'fifties) the Karachay-Cherkess Autonomous Region. Falsely accused by Stalin of collaboration with the Nazis (who never reached this far in their push to the Chechen and Azerbaijani oil-fields), the Karachays (Oct-Nov 1943), the Chechen-Ingush (Feb 1944) and the Balkars (March-April 1944) (plus the Meskh(et)ians and Muslim Armenians, called Hemshinli, in Georgia) shared the same fate as such peoples as the Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars: mass-deportation to the wastes of Central Asia. It was as though these peoples had never existed, their eponymous territories eradicated from contemporary maps and partly re-distributed among neighbours. Regarding the Chechens, one may conclude that this was their punishment for repeatedly opposing external (now Soviet) rule. When the 'punished peoples' were allowed home to the North Caucasus from 1957-58 (though the Georgian authorities have always blocked the return of the Meskh(et)ians), their territories were re-constituted, albeit not always precisely within previous borders -- a slice of Ingush(et)ia, known as the Prigorodni District, was left under the control of the (North) Ossetians. Persuaded to split from the seceding Chechens in 1991 on an apparent promise from Yeltsin that they would regain this lost land, a joint Russo-Ossetian 'policing action' in 1992 resulted in all Ingush resettled in it being either expelled or slaughtered -- the ulcer still festers, aggravated by Chechen refugees.

Gorbachev's *glasnost* encouraged the Soviet peoples to unbottle perceived wrongs. Forces in some union-republics saw this as their chance to push for independence from the USSR, dreams which were realised for all fifteen when the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed in the wake of the failed coup of August 1991. But not all such complaints were directed at the Kremlin Centre -- many of the ethnic minorities had legitimate grievances to air against their respective republican capitals.

Karabagh Armenians feared repetition of the Nakhichevan precedent and demanded union with Armenia. One might have expected Georgia to sympathise with fellow-Christian Armenia, especially given the Zakatala parallel, but Azerbaijan has oil, and support for Karabagh would have had consequences for Georgia's fragmenting periphery. The Kremlin's initial failure to act decisively led to war, resulting in the current occupation of 20% of Azerbaijan by Armenian forces, though a ceasefire

currently obtains. A further potential problem affecting Azerbaijan is that the Lezgians now straddle an international (Russo-Azerbaijani) border, though Daghestan remains basically calm.

In the late 'eighties the North Caucasus saw a universal upgrading of the local administrative units, and the Kremlin assigned funds to attract home members of the Circassian diaspora. Across the mountains in Georgia, however, unofficial opposition-leaders, notably Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia (Mingrelians both), played the card of Georgian nationalism: a fatal error, for in 1989 Georgia's Kartvelians formed only 70.1% of the population (ethnic Georgians constituting considerably less), whilst various minorities live compactly in strategic border-regions. Dangerous calls for restrictions on citizenship and the imposition of the Georgian language on non-Kartvelians, who previously had been content with their mother-tongue and Russian as *lingua franca*, sounded alarm-bells, principally in Abkhazia and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, stirring memories of the Mensheviks and Beria.

Already in June 1988 the Kremlin had received the so-called Abkhazian Letter, whose 87 pages detailed why continued creeping Kartvelianisation of Abkhazia could only be stopped by restoring the republic's status of the 'twenties -- a request in 1978 by Abkhazian intellectuals to secede from Georgia and join the Russian Federation had been rejected, though with compensations, like the establishment in Sukhum of Georgia's second-only university (the Georgian sector remained, however, larger than either the Russian or the Abkhazian) and a half-hour Abkhaz TV-programme twice weekly. News of the Letter caused an explosion of resentment in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and when Soviet troops violently broke up a pro-independence demonstration there on 9th April, the resulting 20 deaths became inextricably linked in the minds of Kartvelians with the Abkhazian question.

Kartvelians absolve themselves from responsibility for the South Ossetian and Abkhazian wars by laying the blame on Kremlin intrigue -- the North Caucasus, after all, furnishes ample evidence of Kremlin *Divide et Impera!* tactics. But this is to ignore the effect of the exploding vitriol aimed at their minorities that began to sully Georgian publications in early 1989, for which Kartvelians alone can be held accountable. One sample will suffice of the attitudes pervading the still growing catalogue of such writings: a private letter to me of 17th Sept 1989 refers to the Abkhazians thus, 'Apart from us Georgians, no-one finds room on their feet for lice' ... Even if our Foreign Office or the US State Department had then been watching

Georgia, who could have garnered all the clues when they employ no Georgian reader?

The Azerbaijani region, south of Tbilisi, saw Georgia's first blood-letting, in July 1989. This was quickly followed by a clash, deliberately engineered by Kostava's and Gamsakhurdia's supporters, in Abkhazia, but the Soviet Interior Ministry speedily deployed peace-keeping troops. After Kostava's death in a car-accident, Gamsakhurdia's election as president was assured. As South Ossetians demanded protection by joining North Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia abolished their autonomy in December 1990 -- an 18-month war, still awaiting final settlement, ensued. Increasingly autocratic and unstable, Gamsakhurdia was ousted in January 1992, and former Party Boss, Eduard Shevardnadze, loathed for his pro-Russian inclinations but now graced with clout in the West, flew in, a flawed *deus ex machina*. Naive Western politicians recklessly rewarded him for his smiling role in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall by recognising Georgia and establishing diplomatic relations, totally disregarding the illegitimacy of the then-ruling State Council and the looming Abkhazian crisis; now an internal Georgian problem, the West collectively washed its hands of it. Faced with Mingrelian sympathy for Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, probably gambling on rallying all Kartvelians against the common foe, celebrated Georgia's admission to the UN by promptly invading Abkhazia (14th August 1992). Fearing realisation of the menacing slogan 'Georgia for the Georgians!', local non-Kartvelians backed the Abkhazians, as indeed did some Kartvelians.

The recently assassinated Deputy Premier of Abkhazia, Yuri Voronov (a locally born Russian), argued in London in 1993 that Yeltsin had approved of the attack, convinced that victory would be Shevardnadze's within days -- hardly surprising then that Shevardnadze was alone among world-leaders enthusiastically to encourage Yeltsin's parallel miscalculation in unleashing his genocidal campaign against Dudaev's Chechenia in December 1994. In fact, the invaders were expelled on 30th Sept 1993 and were accompanied in flight by most of Abkhazia's Kartvelians, though by no means the absurdly exaggerated figure of 300,000, unthinkingly parroted by even UN sources -- the higher the figure, the more international aid Georgia receives; 50,000 Mingrelians still live in Abkhazia. This has been labelled 'ethnic cleansing', even though most cleansed themselves before setting eyes on any troops of the Abkhazian alliance. 'Experts' constantly disparage Abkhazian prowess by asserting it was Russians who inflicted the defeat on 'hated Georgia', but such 'experts' forget that Russia was supplying weapons to Georgia *gratis*, whereas Abkhazians had to pay dearly for everything not gained as booty, and that Russian planes actually bombed

Abkhazian lines in the final push, as an outright Abkhazian victory in no way suited the Kremlin's purpose. Now the Russo-Georgian accord of 15th Sept may herald joint-action to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, which would contravene the UN-sponsored Moscow agreement of 4th April 1994 and might ignite the whole North Caucasus.

If this drab creed of 'territorial integrity' is to be the panacea for the world's ills, then sanctions have to be imposed on those (often precipitately recognised) states who wantonly infringe the rights of minorities the world in its wisdom locks within their jurisdiction: if a state cannot exist with the consent of all its peoples, what moral basis is there for its maintenance within immutable frontiers? Shevardnadze struts the world-stage peddling malicious disinformation about Abkhazian 'aggressive separatism', and denouncing the Abkhazian and Chechen presidents as 'fascists', while the Abkhazians are denied right of reply. The Chechens declared their independence in 1991, an entitlement granted under the Brezhnevite Constitution then in force but ignored by the world and Yeltsin, who justified the carnage by denigrating them as a nation 'sic' of bandits. But the Abkhazians, contrary to popular belief, have only ever reinstated the sovereignty of their 1925 constitution (with its implicit confederal links to Georgia). Both Ardzinba (alone of North Caucasian leaders to oppose the Chechen war) and Dudaev have constantly sought peaceful resolutions of their conflicts -- to be rewarded by Shevardnadze and Yeltsin resorting to the bullet, as their Western partners determinedly gazed the other way.

The Abkhazians are punished for having the effrontery to defend themselves from physical annihilation, suffering blockade from Russia and pressure from the world-community to forget their extraordinary sacrifice (3% killed, Archives and Research Institute torched, their boycotted country, blessed by Nature, mined and ruined) and to settle for essentially the *status quo ante*. Should Britannia heed Shevardnadze's call to squash separatism and seek to regain her renegade Transatlantic colonies or urge others, similarly vanquished in imperial adventures, to accept reality and build constructive new relations with the victors to the advantage of all concerned, just as the prosperity of the world's most successful separatist state, America, has brought benefits to the UK and beyond?

Shevardnadze misses the true parallel between presidents Ardzinba and Dudaev -- untainted by sinister apparatchik-pasts, neither is pretending to cleanse an Augean stable they themselves fouled in their previous incarnations. Assertion of the right to self-determination is no crime -- aggression is what deserves condemnation. Faced

with 'aggressive territorial integrationism', we should censure the war-mongers: Yeltsin and Shevardnadze.

Despite all, the Caucasus survives as a living ethnographic museum, but its balance of languages and cultures is precarious. All the indigenous peoples, mindful that Ubykh became extinct in 1992, desire (and merit) a voice in determining their own futures -- an Assembly (now Confederation) of (Mountain) Caucasian Peoples was created as bulwark for Abkhazia in 1989. Tragically, the ease with which our visionless political managers tolerate murderous bullying among their partners is a direct consequence of their valuing territory above people. In a world where conservation of flora and fauna is so prominent, isn't it time that meaningful protection of endangered peoples took precedence over preservation of arbitrarily drawn lines on a map?

Writing in 1853, the first Briton to visit and champion the cause of the Caucasian mountaineers, David Urquhart, warned, some years after his advocacy had fallen on Palmerston's deaf ears: 'When she "England" proclaims herself the lover of peace at the expense of honour, when she asserts herself the friend of the powerful and the ally of the aggressor, she ceases to have a situation among mankind, not because her fleets are disarmed, but because her character has sunk'. That such attitudes today also characterise our major Western partners (notably America) makes them no less dishonourable.

(3022 words)