

MOBILIZING IN UNCERTAINTY

Collective Identities and War
in Abkhazia

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This historical narrative is known as the “100-year war” of Georgia against Abkhazia, particularly in the Soviet context (Lakoba 1993). Yet the notion of becoming a minority on the land the Abkhaz feel belonging to, as Anchabadze says, has its roots in an earlier period, that of the Russian Empire.

Pre-Soviet Abkhazia: Russian Imperialism, *Makhadzhirstvo*, and Menshevik Georgia

Parts of this narrative extend beyond the scope of our discussion, but recent historical memory dates back to the nineteenth century. Then, the Russian Empire, in its struggle for control over the Caucasus, colonized and depopulated Abkhazia in mass deportations known as *makhadzhirstvo* (exile)—to give way to the resettlement of the territory, primarily by Georgians, but also by Russians, Armenians, and Greeks (Dzidzarija 1982; Achugba 2010).¹ Abkhazia became Russia’s protectorate in 1810 and an administrative unit of the empire in 1864, as the Caucasus War of 1817–1864 ended in Russia’s annexation of the Caucasus (see table 3.1 for a list of status changes).² Mass deportations occurred in the course of colonization, with major waves following the Abkhaz anticolonial uprising of 1866 and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.³ The empire declared the Abkhaz a *guilty* nation for participation on the Ottoman side, a status that was removed for neutrality in the 1905 antitsarist revolution.⁴ But approximately 135,000 Abkhaz, most of the Abkhaz population, were deported by then, leaving 59,000 Abkhaz in Abkhazia, according to the 1897 census, and creating an Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and elsewhere (Dzidzarija in Achugba 2010, 105; Müller 2013).

The prominent Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba (2004) characterizes this as the moment of abolition of Abkhazia’s statehood, then a principedom, and the *makhadzhirstvo* associated with this moment is a painful memory in the collective Abkhaz discourse.⁵ One respondent, who was a Communist Party worker and regional newspaper editor in the Soviet period, captures this widely shared sentiment: “After the *makhadzhirstvo*, the Caucasus wars, most of the Abkhaz were forced to resettle to Turkey. The lands were emptied, especially central Abkhazia, the heart of Abkhazia. By the end of the nineteenth century, pamphlets appeared among the Georgian intelligentsia, [including] ‘Who should be settled in Abkhazia?’⁶ The demographic situation in Abkhazia began changing dramatically. As a result, the Abkhaz, the titular nation of this territory, turned out to be a minority.”

The gradual resettlement of Abkhazia, largely by the Georgian population, unfolded as a result and was accompanied by one of the most dramatic memories of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations of the time, Georgia’s military presence in Abkhazia in 1918–1921. The revolution of 1917 ending Russian imperial rule

TABLE 3.1. Prewar political status of Abkhazia: 1810–1992

	ABKHAZIA IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE		GEORGIAN CONTROL		STATUS CHANGES IN THE SOVIET PERIOD			PREWAR STATUS		
	1864	1880	1907	1917	1918–1921	1921–1922	1922–1931	1931–1990	1990	1992
Russian protectorate	Abkhaz principedom abolished	Abkhaz a <i>guilty</i> nation	<i>Guilt</i> removed for loyalty in the 1905 revolution	Abkhaz People's Council elected	Georgian governor-generalship, military presence in Abkhazia	SSR of Abkhazia	Georgian-Abkhaz Union Treaty	Autonomous Abkhazia within the Georgian SSR	All-Union referendum votes preservation of the Soviet Union	Reinstatement of the 1925 constitution

Source: I consulted documents and materials in Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007; Kacharava 1959; Lakoba 2004; Lezhava 1997, 1998; Nodia 1998; Osmanov and Butaev 1994; and Shamba and Neproshtin 2008, among other sources, in reconstructing the timeline.

enabled the election of the Abkhaz People's Council in Abkhazia, which set a course for self-determination.⁷ "Abkhazia's statehood, lost in June 1864, was thus restored," Lakoba (2004, 13) writes, as a result. The council met with representatives of Georgia on February 9, 1918, and agreed on "good-neighbourly relations" (Lakoba 2013b, 90).⁸ Soon after, the Georgian side declared the independent Georgian Democratic Republic, which was for the large part led by Mensheviks who questioned the viability of a socialist revolution, and sent its army to help the council establish order, but turned Abkhazia into a governor-generalship (Hewitt 2013, 34–35; Suny 1994, 173, 188). This paved the way for declaring the territory an autonomous part of Georgia in 1919.

These years are marked firmly in the Abkhaz memory as Menshevik Georgia's occupation of Abkhazia (Chirikba 1998, 49–50; Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007, 282–286). Punitive measures against council members and the broader population greatly influenced Abkhaz views of Georgia (Kuprava 2007). The Abkhaz whose relatives the Georgian authorities repressed for dissent had a direct relation to this historical experience of violence. As a descendant of one of the council members recounts,

It is difficult to tell this. It starts in 1918. The Mensheviks established a nest here. It was horrible. They killed, arrested, destroyed everyone. My uncle was a member of the People's Council. Nestor Lakoba led it. But there were only seven Abkhaz and twenty-eight Georgians there. What kind of a people's council was that? Then they demanded that Abkhazia become an autonomy so that they could send officials from Tbilisi and we would be subordinate. But what they called an autonomy was a fiction. They ruled everything. It was scary. They humiliated us. My uncle was in prison in 1918–1921. He spoke sharply at council meetings and was arrested four times.

People without the family history of Menshevik violence relate their later sentiments to this distant past indirectly. "Tensions were already present at the end of the nineteenth century," a respondent states. "The first Georgian intelligentsia decided to start the colonization of Abkhazia after the Russian *makhadzhirstvo*, and conflict was already very serious in 1918–1919. Thus my grandmother, for example, hates Georgians. Even my father, such an intelligent person, disliked Georgians." The feeling of humiliation by and dislike for Georgian authorities in Georgia and Georgians living in Abkhazia that many Abkhaz developed through direct and indirect experiences of repression in these years was further ingrained as Menshevik symbols resurfaced at the end of the Soviet period. Pro-independence Georgian marches in Abkhazia in the late 1980s featured the Menshevik flag of the early twentieth-century Democratic Republic of Georgia, which "left deep

wounds in the Abkhaz,” the Abkhaz say. The Abkhaz leadership used the memory of occupation as the basis to declare null and void Georgia’s reinstatement of the 1921 constitution in Abkhazia when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The processes that unfolded in Soviet Abkhazia are generally seen as a continuation of what started in this distant past. As a member of an Abkhaz youth organization in the 1980s demonstrates, “It was a program that Georgian Mensheviks began in the nineteenth century. In the 1930s–1940s, it was realized. Georgians resettled, then schools and faculty preparing Abkhaz teachers were closed, then the alphabet was changed. When Georgia had no barriers to realizing assimilation politics they showed what they wanted: that we forgot our language and could not even speak of the Abkhaz people. Georgia’s goal was to eliminate the self-conception of the Abkhaz and keep an Abkhaz mass that would eventually dissolve in the Georgian identity. This was frightening.” The distinction this respondent makes between Russian and Georgian control is essential to understanding shared Abkhaz views of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The abolition of Abkhazia’s principedom and the *makhadzhirstvo* stem from the Russian colonial presence in Abkhazia. But what followed Georgia’s Menshevik control—further Georgian resettlement, prohibition of the Abkhaz language, the closing of Abkhaz schools, and the rewriting of history to diminish the role of the Abkhaz in Abkhazia’s past—undermined an independent Abkhaz identity. Hence, this respondent concludes, “Russia fought in the nineteenth century in the Caucasus and there were catastrophic consequences, but Russia never said Abkhazia did not exist. Russia won territories, but never touched our historical biography. The infringement by Georgia was all the more painful as it related to our identity and the rejection of an independent political and cultural history.” The Abkhaz see the Georgian demographic expansion and Georgianization of the population in the Soviet era as the steps in this Georgian program taken toward the dissolution of Abkhaz identity.

Political Changes in Soviet Abkhazia: Autonomous Status of 1931

A single event that enabled these Soviet processes, according to Abkhaz respondents, is the change in the political status of Abkhazia from the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) established with the introduction of Soviet power in Abkhazia in 1921 to the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) within the Georgian SSR in 1931. To counter Georgia’s Menshevik control of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz revolutionary organization Kiaraz (Self-Help) sided with the Russian Red Army in its efforts to establish Soviet power in Abkhazia (Dzidzariya 1963, 346–378; Ku-