

Response to Prof. B.G. Hewitt

November 2022

In v. 100, n. 2 of *Slavonic and East European Review* (April 2022), pp. 381-383, Prof. George Hewitt does me the honor of reviewing my recent monograph *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* (Routledge, 2021). Prof. Hewitt is a renowned scholar of the Caucasus and is also the Honorary Consul of Abkhazia in Great Britain, though it often seems that he takes up reviewing books primarily to delight in his by now legendary pedantry (he once took up valuable word space in his review of an edited volume with 19 contributors to correct the transliteration of the name of a publisher in a citation in a footnote in my contribution to that collection) rather than to enlighten the reader about the substantive contributions or shortcomings of the works under review. Being fully cognizant of this, I would normally refrain from publicly responding to such a book review. In this case, however, Prof. Hewitt raises several points that I think need a response, particularly given the influence that his pronouncements will have for how my book is received in Abkhazia.

A substantial part of my book centers on voluminous documentation from the Georgian Communist Party Archive and from the personal papers of N.A. Lakoba at the Hoover Institution about a series of accusations of malfeasance levelled at the eponymous Nestor Lakoba and his leadership group in Soviet Abkhazia of the 1920s and the resulting political conflicts, investigations, and commission hearings, and about how Lakoba was able to weather these storms, preserve his position, and remain in the good graces of the Georgian and Transcaucasian Party leadership. Prof. Hewitt holds that my characterization (including in section headings) of several of these hearings and commissions as “whitewashes” means that I find Lakoba “guilty” of the accusations (p. 382). Based on the transcripts and the reports, I certainly argue that these commissions bent over backwards to protect Lakoba, and that in some cases they were convened specifically for this purpose. But that doesn’t mean – especially considering the nature of Soviet legality – that the alleged transgressions necessarily took place just as reported. My aim in this was to assess the documentary record of the cases and the activities and strategies of the commissions (and of Lakoba himself and his supporters and detractors) in order to understand the underlying political conflicts, not to pronounce on the verisimilitude of accusations.

Analyzing and characterizing the actions and motivations of such commissions and how they functioned is not logically the same thing as passing judgement regarding the content of the various reports, allegations and denunciations that they discussed.

A bit later in his review, Prof. Hewitt writes “If his thesis is correct, how does Blauvelt explain Lakoba’s lasting popularity?” I’m not entirely sure to which “thesis” Prof. Hewitt refers here, perhaps he means the presumption that Lakoba was guilty of the accusations brought against him (again, an assertion that I did not make). Prof. Hewitt in this review seems largely uninterested in the actual theses of my book, which center on the functioning of clientelism in the early Soviet periphery, the intrinsic relationships of local elites to their patrons above and their constituencies below, and the role of Soviet nationalities policy therein. As such, a key theme of the book is precisely Lakoba’s effectiveness on both scores as a client and as a patron, maintaining support from his superiors and popularity among his core constituencies for an extended period.

By “lasting popularity,” Prof. Hewitt is likely referring to Lakoba’s aura in Abkhazia in more recent decades, which I address in the epilogue to the book: the veneration of Lakoba as a saint-like figure of unswerving rectitude, beloved by all his subjects, and the portrayal of Soviet Abkhazia under his rule as a lost Arcadia. Among other things, the conflicts and controversies of the 1920s that I describe in my book, based on the archival sources, are largely absent from the subsequent Abkhazian historiography and public discourse about the period, and these details inevitably complicate the simple earlier narratives. In particular, in the epilogue I critique the lack of documentary evidence for the assertions made about Nestor Lakoba by the modern-day Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba. An example of this that Prof. Hewitt brings up is S. Lakoba’s claim “that Stalin offered Nestor the post of NKVD chief, which was declined,” and about which “Blauvelt himself asserted the very same (with source) [. . . in] his 2007 article [‘Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era’ in the journal *Nationalities Papers*]” (Hewitt, p. 383). In fact, in that 2007 article I did not assert this claim as my own, I referred to it as having been made by others, citing a book by L. Mlechin, who turned out to have heard it from S. Lakoba (to whom I also refer extensively in that section of my 2007 article). Having done much searching in the archives over the intervening years, I simply haven’t found any basis for this argument or for the other assertions of S. Lakoba that I criticize in my book. As I point out there, and as Prof. Hewitt helpfully quotes, in my view S. Lakoba’s interpretations “rely more on

‘popular memory’ and aspirational imagination than on documentable sources.” If Prof. Hewitt (or indeed Prof. S. Lakoba) has actual evidence for this or any of the assertions that I refer to, I would happily stand corrected. Prof. Hewitt asks “[i]s it unreasonable to suggest that Stalin, thus spurred, allowed Beria the following year to liquidate his envied Transcaucasian rival?” (p. 383). My point is that, to my knowledge, there is no evidence at all that Stalin ever made Nestor Lakoba such an offer to head the NKVD (Lakoba’s last written appeal in Stalin’s personal archive, which I cite in the book, makes no reference to it and the phrasing therein suggests that it is highly unlikely), or that Stalin was “thus spurred,” or that this could have been a causal factor in Stalin’s decision making. None of S. Lakoba’s assertions are *prima facie* “unreasonable,” but just because something could possibly have happened is not sufficient to assert that it did; without evidence such interpretations belong to the realm of mythology and not to that of academic history.

Perhaps most seriously, towards the end of his review Prof. Hewitt accuses me of going “beyond the pale” in making a “gratuitously insulting comparison” between S. Lakoba and the Georgian polemicist Pavle Ingorokva. My point is not to compare two individuals or suggest a moral equivalence between them, but rather that the mythologization of Nestor Lakoba and his period of rule in Abkhazia was part of an Abkhazian response to the eliminationist discourse of the Georgian “Ingorokva hypothesis” and its later variants, and further, that fact-free constructions of history (i.e. myths) have become truisms – ideas taken as given by ordinary people – in both Abkhazia and in Georgia, parts of the respective national discourses that have come to perpetuate animosities.

Timothy Blauvelt, Iliia State University