

Colonel Robert Hamilton on Abkhazia (again)

A Reply (again) from George Hewitt

Some 10 years ago I had an exchange of views with one Robert Hamilton of the US Army regarding what he wrote at the time about the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. See, for example: <http://abkhazworld.com/aw/conflict/720-reply-to-hamiltons-reply-from-george-hewitt> and <http://circassianworld.blogspot.co.uk/2008/09/some-thoughts-arising-from-lt-col.html>. He has now returned to this issue in two pieces that appeared on consecutive days (viz. 18/19 December 2017); see: www.fpri.org/article/2017/12/post-soviet-wars-part-i/ and www.fpri.org/article/2017/12/post-soviet-wars-part-ii/. However, Hamilton does not limit himself to just the one post-Soviet conflict, but it is the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict to which I shall limit myself in this riposte, highlighting especially the author's comparison of the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-Ajaria cases.

Hamilton is interested in explaining the origins of certain post-Soviet conflicts and refers to one possible cause proposed by some scholars, namely the Soviet creation of eponymous autonomous entites, illustrating this view by citing: 'Svante Cornell argues that the extension of autonomy to certain groups in the Soviet Republic of Georgia made those groups more likely to rebel once the Soviet state collapsed.' Hamilton, however, recognises that, whilst 'this argument may help explain the cases of the wars in Georgia', it cannot be the sole determining factor, as he rightly points out that conflicts arose in only a small number of the many autonomies established across the USSR. He might have added that Cornell (like others who make the same argument with specific reference to Georgia) is only articulating the belief that is widespread among the Georgians, namely that the Kremlin early on created autonomies within Georgia to act as 'time-bombs' to be primed to explode, should it ever prove necessary, in order to frustrate any moves by the republican centre to seek independence from Moscow. But Hamilton believes that a comparative study of the two Soviet Georgian territories named above can be more revealing. His thesis is summed up as: 'While Soviet policies served to strengthen the pre-existing identity division between Abkhazians and Georgians, those same policies erased the identity division between Ajarians and Georgians.' In Abkhazia 'Soviet ethno-federal policies led to *institutionalized identity divisions*', and thus: 'Where institutionalized identity divisions existed, the sudden *political transition* of the Soviet collapse caused *mobilization* around these identity divisions and *escalation of conflict* between identity groups' (the highlighting is in the original). Hamilton's general approach is described thus: 'For purposes of brevity and comparability, [the second] paper will compare the construction and institutionalization of identities in Abkhazia and Ajaria during the Soviet period.'

Two problems immediately present themselves here: (i) there would seem to be an inconsistency, as Hamilton speaks of the early Soviets 'constructing' an identity for the Abkhazians (as though this identity did not exist prior to 1921!) but at the same time argues that they built on the existing identity and institutionalised it; (ii) his assumption that there existed an 'identity-division' at the start of the Soviet period between 'Ajarians' and 'Georgians' is highly questionable. Hamilton's starting-point is the

presence of these two ethnic categories in the pan-Soviet census of 1926. Georgia's south-western province of Ajaria (sometimes spelled Adjaria, or, as it is in Georgian, Ach'ara) may well, as Hamilton states, have been subjected to long domination and cultural influence from the Ottoman Empire, but in what sense could it be/have been argued that A(d)jarians/Ach'arans have ever possessed a self-identity that was different from other Georgians? The only difference between A(d)jarian/Ach'aran Georgians and (the overwhelming majority of) Georgians living outside this particular region is that (most) A(d)jarian/Ach'aran Georgians adopted Islam during the years of Turkish domination, whilst (most) other Georgians have for centuries been Orthodox Christians. The presence of a category of 'A(d)jarian' in the 1926 census can be easily explained.

In the Family-List of 1886, Georgian speakers were typically listed not as 'Georgians' as such but according to their province of residence (e.g. Pshavs, Tushetians, etc.). If such a practice had been lost by 1926, why was it retained for the Georgians of A(d)jaria/Ach'ara? According to the Treaty of Kars (October 1921), the province of interest to us was ceded to Georgia with a crucial provision that it be granted political autonomy in order to safeguard the largely Muslim population¹. So, the fact that subsequent educational policy saw schooling predominantly in/through Georgian was quite natural and served as no handicap for pupils in the locals — the education-system was probably identical to that in other Georgian provinces, where local dialects survive despite emphasis on the literary language in educational establishment. Hence, one should in no way be surprised that, as Hamilton remarks, 'by the end of the Soviet period Ajarians... self-identified as Georgians', the provisions of the Treaty of Kars being then a distant memory.

What of Abkhazia? Firstly, Hamilton does not deign to inform his readers about the changes to the status of Abkhazia that occurred during the first decade of Soviet rule and which saw Abkhazia downgraded from (a) full union-republic, to (b) 'treaty-republic' in association with Georgia, to (c) autonomous republic within Georgia. So, ignoring this rather crucial development along with the pre-Soviet issues that Abkhazians had with the Georgian authorities in Tbilisi, Hamilton chooses to concentrate on educational practices, maintaining: 'Soviet language policies in Abkhazia privileged the status and use of the Abkhazian and Russian languages over Georgian. As part of the process of *korenizatsiia* ("indigenization"), Soviet officials classified Abkhazia as a "backward" nation, entitling it to special promotion of the Abkhazian language, among other things. So over the course of the Soviet period—aside from a period of "Georgianization" under Stalin in the 1930-40s—the language of instruction in Abkhazia was Abkhazian or Russian...So in Abkhazia the education system—from the primary schools through the university—promoted an identity and history that emphasized the distinctiveness of the region and its people from the rest of the Georgian SSR.' We note here how the severe anti-Abkhazian repressive measures introduced by the Georgian Stalin and his Abkhazia-born Mingrelian lieutenant Lavrent'i Beria, which saw *inter alia* the language banned in schools and the media, a deliberate distorting of Abkhazian history (which is still encouraged in some

¹ It might be worth noting that a number of historical Georgian(-speaking) provinces (e.g. T'ao, K'lardzheti, Shavsheti) remained on the Turkish side of the border where the local Georgian population still preserves the Imerkhevan dialect.

quarters to this day in Georgia), and the entire Abkhazian population coming within a whisker of following several other Soviet nationalities and being deported to Central Asian/Siberian exile in the late 1940s, is simply brushed under the carpet and skated over in virtual silence. But, that said, what exactly was Soviet educational policy in Abkhazia? It so happens that I addressed this very question in 1989, and I shall now quote from that article.

Although the teaching of Abkhaz began on the basis of Gulia and Mach'avariani's alphabet of 1892 (Ch'urghulia 1974.16), it is not clear to me exactly when this occurred or how extensively the language was taught. In 1914/15 only 10% of Abkhazia's population was literate, and there were only 156 schools, catering for 8,700 pupils. Illiteracy is claimed to have been liquidated in 1933, and in 1980 there were 365 schools with 96,100 pupils (*Georgian Encyclopaedia, Appendix p.319*), but of these how many were Abkhaz schools? — in 1966 there were only 91 (Slider 1985). According to the 1981/82 teaching plan, language- and literature-lessons were divided as shewn in Table 7.7 in Abkhaz schools where at the time teaching was totally in Abkhaz (apart from Russian-language classes) up to the fourth class, after which teaching for all subjects save Abkhaz itself switched to Russian; today the switch occurs in class 5...I am not able to say what proportion of Abkhazians attend Abkhaz schools. Until quite recently the second language taught in Russian schools in Abkhazia was Georgian, but some time since the 1981/82 teaching-plan appeared it has become possible for those who wish it to study Abkhaz as their second language in such schools.

TABLE 7.7

Abkhaz Language Schools (number of periods of instruction per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Abkhaz Lang.	7	6	6	3	3	3	2	2	-	-
Russian Lang.	8	9	9	6	6	4	4/3	2	1	1
Abkhaz Lit.	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	2	3	3
Russian Lit.	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	3	2

The glaring statistic that stands out here is the fact that as of 1966 a mere 91 schools in Abkhazia were Abkhaz-language schools in which the timetable just set out applied. I do not have the figures for how the by far larger number of schools were divided between Russian-language and Georgian-language institutions, but it is obvious that the impression made by Hamilton's bald assertion about language-education in Soviet Abkhazia is grossly misleading. It may be assumed that the majority of Georgian-language schools will have been situated in areas where Kartvelians (predominantly Mingrelians, Georgians, and Svans) lived, which (especially after the mass-importation of Kartvelians from various districts within Georgia proper during the Stalin-Beria years) will have been: the Gal District, various towns in the Ochamchira and Gulripsh Districts up to and including the capital Sukhum, plus the north-western town of Gagra. Here there will have been ample opportunity for Kartvelians to have had their children educated in Georgian-language schools, and there will no doubt have been a sufficient number of Russian-language schools distributed across the autonomous republic to cater for Russian, Armenian (though some Armenian-language schools also existed), Greek and other non-Caucasian children — it was certainly also the case that not all Abkhazian children were sent to Abkhaz-language schools, just as some Kartvelian parents with a mind to future employment-prospects will have preferred to have their children educated in Russian-language schools. The teaching-plans for language and literature in these two

types of school in Georgia (and presumably such timetables will have applied within Abkhazia at the given time) for 1981/82 were as follows:

TABLE 7.8²

Georgian Language Schools (number of periods of instruction per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Geo Lang.	11	9	9	4	4	4	3	2	-	-
Geo Lit.	-	-	-	2	3	2	2	3	4	3
Russ Lang/Lit.	4	5	6	6	5	4	5/4	3	3	3

TABLE 7.9

Russian Language Schools (number of periods of instruction per week)

Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Russ Lang.	12	11	10	6	6	4	3	2	-	-
Russ Lit.	-	-	-	2	2	2	2	3	4	3
Geo Lang/Lit.	-	-	3	3	3	3	3/2	3	3	3

A university was established in Sukhum in 1978 following anti-Georgian(isation) demonstrations. At the time this was only the second university to exist in Georgia (after Tbilisi State University, founded 1918) — before the demonstrations it had been planned that Georgia's second university would be created in A(d)jaria/Ach'ara's capital, Batumi. It was regrettable that Sukhum's university was given the title 'Abkhazian State University', because this implied that it existed primarily to serve only the local Abkhazians. In fact, the internal structure reveals that this was far from the case. There were three divisions based on language: the Georgian sector, the Russian sector, and the Abkhazian sector; the Abkhazian sector was the smallest of the three. It was deemed by the authorities in Tbilisi that the predominance of the Georgian sector would facilitate growth of the Kartvelian demographic within Abkhazia, for any Kartvelian (predominantly Mingrelian from neighbouring Mingrelia) students registering at this university from outside Abkhazia gained local residency-rights upon graduation.

I would argue that these straightforward facts demolish at a stroke the central pillar of Hamilton's argument. His broad-brush approach combined with either ignorance, or a calculated ignoring, of essential details does nothing to help understand the specifics of Abkhazians' long-standing complaints against Georgia(ns) and certainly contributes nothing to (the admittedly abysmal) international efforts to resolve the conflict, which, it has to be underlined, has been neglected from its inception. It is only by examining the history of Abkhazian-Georgian relations (starting at the very latest from the years following the mass-migration of Abkhazia's native population to Ottoman lands in the second half of the 19th century following the end of the great Caucasian War in 1864 and the subsequent Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78) that one can gain that fundamental understanding. I have written about this problem so often since the fatal clashes between

² I number this and the following Table 7.8 and 7.9 merely to continue from 7.7, which was the number of that Table in my 1989 article.

Kartvelians and Abkhazians in Abkhazia in July 1989 that I shall not recapitulate the facts here and shall leave it to readers unfamiliar with my output to familiarise themselves with the essentials of the case (for examples see articles on my website — www.georgehewitt.net — or my 2013 monograph). The basic facts, I have long maintained, demonstrate that it was not general Soviet policy as such as enacted from 1921 to 1991, convenient and comforting a belief though this be for those approaching the topic either with a typically Cold-War anti-Russian prejudice that indiscriminately supports governments proclaiming a pro-Western stance or infected by the current climate of anti-Russian hysteria. Rather one should concentrate on charting the specific anti-Abkhazian measures implemented to favour the Georgian position in the region, starting with the actions of the most influential Georgian of them all, Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin, and including his Kartvelian lieutenants: the Mingrelian Lavrent’i Beria (initially in Tbilisi and then in Moscow), the Svan K’andid Chark’viani (in Tbilisi), and the Georgian Ak’ak’i Mgeladze (in Sukhum and Tbilisi). After the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953, it is true that measures were put in place in Abkhazia to compensate for what had happened there during the Stalin years. Even so, there were demonstrations in Abkhazia against Georgian actions more or less every decade through to the aforementioned clashes in July 1989 and the eventual war of 1992-93. In the post-Stalin decades it was not directly from Moscow but from the Georgian capital Tbilisi that such mischievous attempts emanated to continue interference in the socio-economic-political situation within Abkhazia to the advantage of specifically Georgian interests — the deliberate distortion of Abkhazian history by P’avle Ingoroq’va first published in the late 1940s appeared in book-form in 1954, and his sophistic hypotheses were revived during the heady chauvinism that exploded in Georgia in 1988-89; one should also add the systematic rubbishing of Abkhazian scholars/scholarship, the late Professor Shalva Inal-Ipa being a popular target in this regard. Anyone who turns a blind eye to, or (even worse) seeks to defend, such Georgian meddling in, and manipulation of, Abkhazian affairs over the decades, will never fully appreciate the nature of the problem they claim to be addressing and thus be unable meaningfully to contribute to attempts to reach an accommodation between the two sides.

In closing might it not be reasonable to ask Col. Hamilton the following question? If linguists have generally taken a positive view of the early Soviet attempts to help eradicate illiteracy via the policies they adopted towards many of the minority and (largely) unwritten languages across the vast Soviet territories, what specific policies would Hamilton have liked to see them adopt towards Abkhaz(ians)? Also, ‘A(d)jarian’ was not the only category on the 1926 Georgian census subsequently to disappear; there were also ‘Mingrelian’, ‘Svan’ and ‘Laz’. Now, unlike the Georgian-speaking A(d)jarians/Ach’arans, the Mingrelians, Svans and Laz (N.B. most of the Laz live(d) on the Turkish side of the Turkish-Georgian border, where, incidentally, leading members of the community object to attempts emanating from Georgia to re-categorise them as ‘Georgians’ and/or have their language classified as a ‘dialect’ of Georgian), these peoples spoke (and perhaps still speak) languages which are different from, albeit related to, Georgian (possibly in addition to Georgian as well). So, what does Hamilton think that the Soviet and/or Georgian attitude to these minority languages ought to have been or (within independent Georgia) be today, recalling that Georgia promised to sign the

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) within a year of being admitted to the Council of Europe (in 1999), a promise that remains unfulfilled?

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