

Mariam Lordkipanidze "The Abkhazians and Abkhazia"
(in Georgian, Russian and English); Tbilisi, 1990: Ganatleba (75pp.)

Reviewed by Yuri Voronov

The Institute of Language, Literature and History

Sukhum, Abkhazia

The school of scholarship to which Mariam Lordkipanidze (ML), professor of history and corresponding-member of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, belongs represents a typical extension of the Soviet administrative system. Already in the 1930s the history of the peoples of the USSR was placed in the hands of the Academies of Sciences of the 15 Union Republics, where social scientists at once became appendages of the ideological structures whose purpose was to prove the superiority of the native peoples over the non-native, of the large nations over the small. In practical terms this led to the extinction of the more objective schools of Caucasology in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and Moscow. In each republic there became established standard variants of local history, and, when in the 1970s the need arose for a composite history of the countries of Transcaucasia, it became clear that the views about this history among leading representative academics in the respective republics were so divergent that such a jointly prepared general work on this theme was quite out of the question.

The position of the Autonomous Republics within the Union Republics is that of 3rd-class states. This gave life to yet another tier of historical elaboration, which re-cut the cloth of the history of these autonomies in accordance with the conception of the leading scholars within each Union Republic. Such manipulation of history took on the shape here and there of actual law. Thus, for instance, in Georgia in 1949 with the aim of keeping local materials out of the hands of Russian and foreign researchers a special law was promulgated according to which archaeological research on the territory of the republic was forbidden to all persons and organisations which have no relations with the Georgian Academy of Sciences. When in 1966 I began to concern myself with the study of Abkhazia, my first articles in Moscow scholarly journals resulted in the procurator issuing a search-warrant against me and in further victimisation. Since I persevered in my investigations, matters reached such a pitch that the government of Georgia in 1979 obtained through the agency of Soviet Politburo ideologue Mikhail Suslov a special veto over the publication of my books in Moscow publishing-houses on the grounds that my work was not in harmony with the 'achievements' of Georgian scholars!

Today in the crisis-conditions being experienced by the USSR unique little Abkhazia and its history are being stripped of even that minimal defence they hitherto enjoyed. Georgian scholars like ML have effectively switched direction and have rushed to serve the neo-Bolshevik administration of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who has set himself the goal of liquidating the statehood and culture of the Abkhazians. Historians first write their histories, but the doleful

consequence is always the appearance of those who are ready to take up arms in defence of those 'histories'.

Since this brochure contains Georgian, Russian and English versions of the same work, ML allows herself at most 33 pages (viz. the Georgian original) "to elucidate the meanings of the terms 'Abkhazia' and 'Abkhaz' in the written sources of different languages at different periods". She begins her history of these terms with an excursus to the Stone and Bronze Ages, stating that, if for the VI-Vth millennia there exist certain differences of opinion as to the placing of ethnic groups in "historical Western Georgia", from the IIIrd or IInd millennia the picture becomes noticeably clearer, and in the IInd-Ist millennia B.C. Kartvelians spread out widely over the western Transcaucasus. This is borne out, she asseverates, by "Svan (Kartvelian) toponymy", as characterised by the name "of the city Tskhumi (= Sukhumi) from Svan *rexila* 'hornbeam'". This conclusion ML underlines by references both to "the data of Greek mythology" and to a list of Graeco-Roman authors, to whom is ascribed the contention that the Colcho-Laz in the VIth-Ist centuries B.C. settled the entire eastern coast of the Black Sea as far as Nikopsia (which ML equates with Tuapse, though others do not accept such a northern location for this ancient site), and that the territory of today's Abkhazia was wholly part of "The Kingdom of Colchis".

All of this puts a reader who is familiar with the history of this problem in a difficult position: he will naturally wonder how on the basis of a single toponym attested in Georgian sources of the XIth century (and *that* in a copy dating from the late Middle Ages) and referring to a city which in the course of the preceding one and a half millennia had twice changed its Greek designation (Dioskurias, Sebastopolis) ML can deduce that in the Bronze and Classical epochs the population of "today's Abkhaz ASSR spoke contemporaneously in all 4 modern Kartvelian languages" (Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, Svan)! The informed reader knows that in reality there do not exist either any written sources in the language of any of the peoples, other than the Greeks, inhabiting the eastern Black Sea coast prior to the start of our era or indeed any works of the ancient authors which are specifically devoted to the study or description of the tongues of the Colchians, Heniokhoi and other tribes mentioned on the territory of today's Abkhazia. In the mind of the specialist will be formed the strong impression that ML either does not know or is intentionally hiding from her readers the fact that the Georgian, Laz, Mingrelian and Svan languages, though going back to a single root, have undergone an independent path of development of many thousands of years, and that their speakers over a long period have acquired their own ecological niche and history, which it is today convenient to forget for certain political and economic motives. The specialist also knows firstly that the myth of the Argonauts is not a source for history but rather for the ideology of the Ancient Greeks' process of colonisation, which proceeded throughout the Mediterranean and along the Black Sea coast, and secondly that the evidence of Strabo about the Svans is internally inconsistent and defective, etc...

Equally uncompromising is the way ML decides the problem of the settlement of Abkhazia in the Ist-VIIIth centuries: recalling that according to the sources the Abazgians and Apsilians lived

here throughout this period, she emphasises the suspicions of herself and like-minded persons either that these tribes were newcomers or that in general they were not the ancestors of today's Abkhazians. She then declares that already in the IInd century Apsilia was divided between Lazika and Lazika's vassal, Abazgia, and that in the VIth century this Abazgia became so powerful that "it incorporated within itself the territory of neighbouring Sanigia, Missimiania and finally Apsilia". Moreover, while underscoring that the ethnicity of the Missimianians is a matter of dispute, ML assures her readers that for her "the important consideration is that culturally and historically they were undoubtedly Georgians"...

In reading this booklet the informed reader will probably suppose himself to be living a nightmare -- what else is he to think when he knows that in reality there exists no source earlier than 554 A.D. that gives concrete information either about the placement of borders between Lazika, Apsilia, Missimiania and Abazgia, or about the dependence of the whole of this territory on the Laz. Any source-specialist could not classify as anything other than pure fiction the assertion about the division of Apsilia in the IInd century between the Laz and the Abazgians. ML chose not to mention the sufficiently numerous publications in which it is shewn that the short-lived "dependence" (in the second quarter of the VIth century) of the Apsilians and Abazgians on Lazika was organised by Byzantium in its own interests, and that this design quickly flopped, the Empire having to build a local administration on a horizontal basis. Her own personal assertion about the strengthening of the Abazgians in the VIth century and about their seizing of Apsilia and Missimiania ML underlines by reference to pages 62-67 of the book **From the History of Abkhazia in the Middle Ages** (in Russian) by the Abkhazian historian Z.V. Anchabadze, where, however, there is no such testimony, though there does appear the deduction which, though no more firmly based, is at best convenient for ML and those who share her beliefs, to the effect that "Apsilia and Missimiania had already for more than a century and a half been part of Lazika". But the assertion that the Missimianians were "culturally and historically undoubtedly Georgians" is simple mockery of the memory of Agathias who already in the fifties of the VIth century stressed the cultural and linguistic closeness of the Missimianians to the Apsilians.

As to the Middle Ages ML observes that Abazgia/Abkhazia signified first only part of today's Abkhazia, then the territory of "the West Georgian state", then the territory of the entire "Georgian state", and finally the territory of modern Abkhazia (from the XVIIth century). The term 'Abkhazian' underwent a parallel evolution, signifying originally Abazgian/Abkhazian, then a "West Georgian" (VIIIth century) and simply a "Georgian" (IXth century), and only from the XVIIth century "does he who calls himself *Apswa* begin to be styled an Abkhazian".

At the same time ML undertakes excursions into different moments of Abkhazia's history, supposing that in the VIIIth century there lived just one Leon the Abkhazian, that "the Abkhazian Kingdom by virtue of the overwhelming majority of its population, its language, culture, writing, and state-politics was a Georgian state, and that the kings of the Abkhazians were, according to these same principles, Georgians", that already in the IXth century at the wish of the Abkhazian kings the Abkhazian Church in its ecclesiastical relations abandoned

subservience to the Patriarchate of Constantinople and entered the structure of the See of Mtskheta, that in the Xth century the architecture of Abkhazia took on a "common-Georgian character", that in the XI-XIIIth centuries the "ancient Abkhazians, Kartvelians in origin or by history and culture, were just the same Georgians as the Mingrelians, Svans, Karts, Kakhs", that in the XV-XVIth centuries "there took place migrations of tribes from the North Caucasus", as a result of which on the territory of the "Kingdom of Abkhazia" there appeared a "Circassian population" which styled itself "Apswa", that in the XIV-XVth centuries only Georgians, Jews and Muslims lived in Sukhumi, and if Abkhazians too lived there, then "foreigners just counted them as Georgians", that since the phrase "Apsar language" exists only in a Georgian manuscript-copy of the XVIIIth century, one must hypothesise that "the tribes which had their own Apsar language were late immigrants into Georgia" from the North Caucasus, that the Georgian language held the "predominant position in Abkhazia" upto the XIXth century, when "the tsarist regime began its own offensive against the Georgian tongue", that services in the churches of Abkhazia were conducted in Georgian upto 1811, that the Abkhazians "are subsumed within the confines of a variation of local Georgian anthropological types", which stands opposed in this regard to the "Circassian groups", that "those who today name themselves *Apswa* and whom we [Georgians] call *apkhazebi* are a nation with no other homeland apart from Georgia", that the Georgians and the Abkhazians (Apswa) are the indigenous population of Georgia, "that the Abkhazians inhabit their own territory either from ancient times or from the XVI-XVIIth centuries", that upto the XIX-XXth centuries the Apswa had Georgian "self-awareness", etc...

In fact, according to the testimony of Georgian sources there were two Leons in Abkhazian history. Furthermore, there is no concrete source of any kind to support the supposition that the Abkhazian Church abandoned its subservience to Constantinople either in the IXth or Xth century. On the contrary there exists a correspondence of Constantinople Patriarch Nicholas the Mystic from which it follows that during the reign of Giorgi II (929-957) the Abkhazian administration in its ecclesiastical relations was orientated towards Byzantium. And of all this there is not one word in the booklet under review.

ML seriously proposes that, since a number of concretely Abkhazian ecclesiastical centres in the IX-XIth centuries do not figure in the lists of hierarchies of the Constantinople Patriarchate (the archbishops of Abazgia are mentioned in these lists upto the 40s of the IXth century and at the start of the Xth), this can only be taken as evidence of the dependence for the rest of the time of the Abkhazian Church on the Catholicosate in Mtskheta. It follows that at this period Byzantium must have lost its position in the region and that there existed here no other counterbalance to the Georgian ecclesiastical hierarchy. The facts, however, speak of something different. The period under discussion on the Black Sea coast is characterised by the strengthening of the ideological and political expansion of the Byzantine empire in the direction of the Bulgarians, Russians and North Caucasian Alans. At the start of the Xth century in the West Caucasus is formed the Alan Mitropolate, itself subordinate to Constantinople, and its merger with this which is certainly more logical for the Abkhazian Church. At the end of the Xth and beginning of the XIth centuries the Alan Mitropolate pretended to dominion over the ecclesiastical centres

even on the south coast of the Black Sea (Kerasunt), which would hardly have been possible under conditions whereby the intervening ecclesiastical centres in Abkhazia proper were not themselves subordinate to it. The Mitropolate of Alania retains its place in the lists of the Constantinople Patriarchate until the end of the XIIth century when the archbishoprics in the environs of Trebizond (Sotiriupolis) were again formally subordinated to the Alan archbishop. The gradual expulsion of Byzantine clerics from Alania and the parallel weakening (under the influence of the Mongol invasion) of the Catholicosate in Mtskheta led to the appearance of the Abkhazian Autocephalous Catholicosate (with its centre in Pitsunda), which continued its existence from the middle of the XIIIth to the middle of the XVIIth century.

Referring to the "general Georgian character" of the Abkhazian monuments of the Xth century ML is forced to keep silent about those works by both native and foreign researchers where they speak of the direct link of these monuments with east Byzantine architecture as well as of the fact that the territory of Abkhazia proper then too appeared autonomous even in relation to the Abkhazian Kingdom, the rulers of which assiduously built churches not in Kutaisi, the capital of this state, but in the zone between Bzyp and Bedia, which was nearest to the sea and to Byzantium. And, of course, it is not accidental that the churches of Abkhazia at this period are united with those of Alania within the bounds of the distinctive "Abkhazo-Alan school" of eastern Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture...

ML is wrong in seeking to convince the uninformed reader that the Apswa began to be called Abkhazians only from the XVIIth century. An Armenian source of the VIIth century already fixes the parallel usage of the terms "Abaza" (= Abazgia) and "Pisinun" (= Apsny [Abkhazia]) in relation to "Apxazak" (= Abkhazians) and "Apšilk" (= Apsilians). And Georgian sources definitely fix the joint-existence of the terms "Abkhazia" and "Apsars" from the XII-XIIIth centuries in connection with the territory of the Eristavate of Tskhumi, whither Queen Tamar and her son Giorgi Laša used to travel for holidays...

Indicative of ML's frivolous relationship with historical facts is the example of her passage on the migration into Abkhazia of Circassian-Apswas. Here is her touching description of the local situation: "Shedding their blood on Georgian soil, Georgians became the victims in one-sided wars. During this time the population in the country noticeably declined. Into the depopulated lowland regions descended the population from the mountains, whilst the vacated slopes of the Caucasus were settled...by incoming Apswa from the North Caucasus".

The picture is impressive but has no connection with Abkhazia. In the first place, it is precisely from the XIVth century that a reverse movement is observable -- the Abazinians, about whom ML has completely forgotten, migrate from Abkhazia to the North Caucasus. In the second place, as established by archaeological excavations in Abkhazia in recent summers, from the XIVth century the local population lives through a demographic explosion, which is especially clearly illustrated by the sharp increase in number of parish-churches and cemeteries beside them.

Speaking of the population of Sebastopolis-Sukhumi in the XIV-XVth centuries ML ignores the direct testimony of Italian sources for the presence in this city of Abkhazians. Here is what the most distinguished specialist on the history of the Black Sea coast at this period, Prof. S. Karpov, writes about this: "The population of Sebastopolis was...ethnically variegated. Alongside Greeks and Abkhazians there lived there many Jews". ML ignores also such results of the Abkhazians' war of liberation in the XVIIth century as both the expulsion from their territory of all priests, including the Catholicos, who had played a role as champions of the politics of the Mingrelian administration and the dilapidation and destruction at just that time of almost all the christian churches in the area. Given all this, talk of "the Georgian self-awareness" of the Abkhazians and of the conducting of services in their churches in the Georgian language upto the start of the XIXth century, plus all discourse of dual aboriginality on this territory is manifestly designed for an ignorant readership. Equally "based on fact" are the excursions into anthropology -- by denying, on the one hand, the anthropological unity of the Abkhazians with the Circassians, and, on the other hand, by postulating the introduction into Abkhazia of such a mass of "Circassian-Apswas" that in the course of a single century the ethnic shape of the region completely altered, the venerable lady Mariam just hangs poised in mid air!

At first glance the Georgian, Russian and English texts of this new monograph are identical. However, a closer reading reveals that the author makes allowances for the specifics of the reader. That which is given in the Georgian version is modified in the Russian, whilst that which is absent from the first two is included in the English version. For example, the excursus designed for the English into the demography of the XIXth century contains the assertion that out of the 68,773 inhabitants of Abkhazia in 1886 Georgians constituted 34,806 and Abkhazians 28,320, although in reality the village-by-village census of 1886 gives a different picture -- 58,963 Abkhazians versus 4,166 Mingrelians and other Kartvelians. Stressing that Georgians along with the Abkhazians are the aboriginals of Abkhazia, ML sees the main danger to them as residing in "the non-local populations" of Russians and Armenians, obviously striving thereby to justify the growth in the region of Russophobia and Armenophobia.

The aim of this booklet is principally to deprive the author's fellow-countrymen of their memory of local history and to spread disinformation among the scholarly community abroad. No-one who wishes to be taken seriously as a scholar would have written such a booklet.