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*Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* by Timothy K. Blauvelt (review)

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scientist who continually rethought his work in the light of new evidence. There is thereby an ‘orthodoxy’ only if part of his thought is frozen in time. Marx’s Russian studies, as Teodor Shanin, James White, and others have shown, had a profound impact on the model of economic development posited in *Das Kapital* volume one, the future editions of which were altered to take the results of Marx’s new knowledge of the Russian economy into account. Bergman shrugs off the late Marx and Russia as a ‘flirtation with the notion of conflating the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions in Russia into one’ (p. 193), and throughout the text berates the Bolsheviks for seizing power to establish a proletarian revolution ‘before its preconditions and prerequisites existed’ (p. 233). Perhaps this is why Bergman views pre-1917 Bolshevism as a ‘failure’ (p. 455) and once in power their Marxism ‘largely useless’ (p. 492). Against this one could claim that pre-1917 Bolshevism and Trotskii correctly identified the ‘objective’ conditions that made a workers’ revolution in Russia feasible. This issued from a Marxist political economic analysis of Russian society in combination with viewing a Russian revolution not within the confines of the tsarist state, but within the international order. An understanding of how Bolshevism achieved genuine popularity in 1917 as part of a popular revolution is absent from this text. Russian Marxism and Bolshevism was much stronger and richer than portrayed here, and the influence of the French Revolutionary tradition on Bolshevik policy is vastly overstated.

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Blauvelt, Timothy K. *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba*. Imperial Transformations – Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet History. Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2021. xv + 248 pp. Map. Illustration. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £120.00; £33.29 (e-book).

IN 2007 Timothy Blauvelt published an article entitled ‘Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era’ in the journal *Nationalities Papers* (35, 2, pp. 203–32). This book essentially elaborates the themes of that article, which is mentioned only in the footnotes, being omitted from the bibliography.

The focus here is on the career of leading Abkhazian Bolshevik Nestor Lakoba (1893–1936), especially during his over-lordship in his native, multi-ethnic republic of Abkhazia (nestling between sea and mountains in north-west Transcaucasia) from the establishment locally of Soviet power (1921) through to his death/murder in 1936. Examining the effect on Lakoba’s operational capacity of the shift from Moscow’s initial support for local minorities (e.g.

Abkhazians under the 1920s' *korenizatsija* 'local rooting') to its allotting preferential powers to Union-Republics' titular nations (e.g. Georgians) in the 1930s against a permanent backdrop of personal and/or ethnic rivalries both inside demographically manipulated Abkhazia and beyond would always provide ingredients for an intriguing study. Sukhum's divided power-relations — vertically with Moscow (sc. Georgian Stalin) and horizontally with Tbilisi, seat of both the Georgian government (power-base for Abkhazia-born Mingrelian Lavrenti Beria) and the administrative head-quarters for the Transcaucasian Federation (ZSFSR) — add spicy complication/?opportunity. Initially a Union-Republic (1921) with its own constitution and flag (1925), Abkhazia became a Treaty-Republic with Georgia, entering the ZSFSR with the latter in 1922, until formal demotion to an Autonomous Republic within it (1931).

Series-editor Ronald Suny's Foreword establishes the tone, describing earlier accounts as probably 'misremembered' or possibly 'avoided'. Blauvelt then goes for his target, citing copious extracts mined from the archives of the myriad accusations (e.g. nepotism, protecting kin/clients, favouring ethnic Abkhazians, extortion, bribery, even collusion in, or concealment of, murder) levelled (sometimes repeatedly) against Lakoba over the years by possibly disgruntled or envious individuals and/or commissions of inquiry sent to Sukhum, or formed in Tbilisi, to examine them, these being the 'trials' in the title. Blauvelt's verdict on the resulting exoneration? — 'A routine whitewash' (pp. 134–41) or 'Sturua commission whitewash' (pp. 163–76) — i.e. 'guilty'.

One 'whitewasher' when collectivization was being implemented unenthusiastically was Stalin himself, who urged in 1929 that 'the specific particularities of the Abkhazian situation' be remembered and that 'trying to mechanically transfer Russian models of socialist construction to Abkhazian soil' would be a mistake (pp. 161–62). Perhaps he had in mind the traditional code of *apswara*, which regulates so much of Abkhazian behaviour (including deference to elders), or the kinship-forming practice of nobles entrusting sons to peasant-families for fostering (on this *Atalychestvo* see Shalva Ina-Ipa's article at <<https://abkhazworld.com/aw/abkhazians/culture/644-the-social-reality-of-atalyk>>). Nevertheless, Stalin's reservation about Lakoba 'finding support in all layers of the Abkhazian population' eventually served posthumously to undermine his inviolability (p. 209), implying sympathy with élites/kulaks.

If his thesis is correct, how does Blauvelt explain Lakoba's lasting popularity? He ascribes it to those who idealize Abkhazia under his tenure, singling out today's leading Abkhazian historian, Stanislav Lakoba (re-christened 'Svyatitslav', p. 162) for particular disparagement, alleging that his political writings often rely 'more on "popular memory" and aspirational imagination than on documentable sources' (p. 234). One example of such 'myth-making

intended (consciously or unconsciously) to embellish the historical importance of Lakoba' is his claim that Stalin offered Nestor the post of NKVD-chief, which was declined. This is an odd charge, since Blauvelt himself asserted the very same (with source) on p. 215 of his 2007 article. Is it unreasonable to suggest that Stalin, thus spurned, allowed Beria the following year to liquidate his envied Transcaucasian rival (and later his entire family)?

Naturally, it is legitimate for historians to interpret history differently, but beyond the pale is the gratuitously insulting comparison between a respected historian (S. Lakoba) and probably the most loathed figure amongst those who have deliberately falsified Abkhazian history in the service of Georgians' nationalist agenda, namely P'avle Ingoroq'va (1893–1990) (p. 234). Ingoroq'va manufactured in the late 1940s his notorious 'Hypothesis' (published first in 1950 [*Mnatobi* 1 & 3] then in the monumental *Giorgi Merchule* in 1954), that today's Abkhazians were seventeenth-century newcomers to Abkhazia, seemingly to justify the then-planned deportation of the Abkhazians. Were Abkhazians ever to acquaint themselves with this work, what would be their likely reaction? Nestor Lakoba's reputation, far from being diminished, would surely be enhanced, given the skills he must have deployed to overcome multifarious challenges and achieve what he did for Abkhazia during fifteen momentous years in charge. Encountering such remarks about inter-ethnic relations as 'Kadyrov criticized Georgian chauvinism [...] among the Georgian intelligentsia and Party élite, which in turn provoked an Abkhaz nationalist reaction' (p. 147 for 1929), imaginary Abkhazian readers, conscious of events since 1989, will probably sigh and think, '*Plus ça change*'. Perhaps, then, the editor's characterization of the book as 'extraordinary' is justified, but not in the way Suny supposes (or his author intended).

Finally, the book is let down by consistently poor editing. By my reckoning a list of Corrigenda would include at least 117 entries. Though not all are as egregious as the few choice examples below, after an outlay of £120 readers might still be excused for expecting the final preparation for printing to have been done with greater care and attention: p. 28 *Apsny Q'apsh* (Red Abkhazia), not '*Apsny Kapsh*' (Red Banner); p. 103 Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, who had played such a crucial role in keeping Benia in place (not 'Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, who had played such a crucial role in keeping Beria in place'); p. 226 climax (not 'crescendo'); p. 206: the sequence 'if only in a scrapple in absentia' is beyond my comprehension.

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