



# the accidental ambassador

WHEN A MILD-MANNERED LINGUIST PUBLISHED AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA IN 1989, HE SUDDENLY FOUND HIMSELF THE ENEMY OF THE NASCENT POST-SOVIET REPUBLIC – AND A DIPLOMAT FOR ITS BREAKAWAY TERRITORY.

*Writer Kieran Pender Photographer Alice Aedy*

ONE OF THE MANY QUIRKS ABOUT VISITING ABKHAZIA, A SEPARATIST TERRITORY ON THE BLACK SEA CLAIMED BY GEORGIA, IS THE PROCESS OF OBTAINING A VISA.

Prospective travellers do not attend grand embassies with officious consular staff, nor waste hours in visa-on-arrival lines at overcrowded airports. To get permission to visit this picturesque breakaway state in the Caucasus, intrepid tourists email Professor George Hewitt.

An affable 68-year-old with greying hair and a scholarly manner, Hewitt serves as Abkhazia's honorary consul to the U.K. He is, essentially, an unofficial ambassador for an unofficial state. In addition to issuing colourful visas and providing travel advice, the recently retired academic advocates for the Abkhazian cause.

This is no small task. More than two decades after seceding from Georgia in an ethnically charged conflict, Abkhazia is recognised by just Russia and a few unlikely allies. Backed by the U.S. and European Union, Georgia insists on its territorial integrity and dismisses Abkhazia as a Russian puppet. Hewitt is often the target of angry online

comments from Georgians, who maintain that Abkhazia is part of Georgia.

How did a genial British academic become a national hero in one obscure part of the Caucasus, and a hate figure in another? To understand this story, we first have to go back to 1970s Tbilisi, the capital of Soviet-era Georgia, where a young Hewitt went looking for help with his studies.

"I was a classicist by education, and studied at Cambridge," Hewitt explains from his Yorkshire home office, which is crammed floor to ceiling with weighty tomes. "I decided to undertake my doctorate in languages, and was initially attracted to studying Lithuanian, but the relevant professor did not reply in time – he was away travelling. Instead I picked Armenian, and was told I would need to learn Georgian as well."

The temporary absence of a Lithuanian professor would profoundly alter the course of Hewitt's life. The researcher became intrigued by Georgian, which he describes as being "much more difficult and interesting than Armenian", and was soon studying in Tbilisi with the support of the British government. He also received tuition in the complex language of nearby Abkhazia, and one day went in search of a native speaker to supplement his studies.

"Zaira, an Abkhazian, was living in the same apartment block as me," Hewitt says. "I met her within weeks of my arrival in September 1975, but we could not communicate properly until Christmas, because she did not speak English and I was not fluent in Georgian. For months we spoke via an interpreter." Ten months after they first met, the pair married.

Ethnic Abkhazians have inhabited a thin slice of territory between the Black Sea and the Caucasus' high peaks since at least Roman times. The region was a melting pot of different peoples – Greek geographer Strabo described it as a "common mart" of 70 distinct ethnicities – and Abkhazia would oscillate between independence and vassal status for most of the next two millennia. It came under the Russian Empire's purview in 1810, and was briefly a full member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But in 1921, Abkhazia merged with Soviet Georgia, eventually being fully subsumed as an autonomous republic.

"I spent a lot of time in both Georgia and Abkhazia during the 1980s," Hewitt continues. "I began to notice a degree of tension between the two groups. Through my academic research, I also uncovered documents about the banning of Abkhaz as a language of education or publication."

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From the Stalin era onwards, Abkhazia was subject to a campaign of ‘Georgianisation’. Abkhazian intellectual and political elites were ‘liquidated’, while Georgians were resettled en masse into Abkhazia. “Midway through that research, I knew that I was going to have difficulties with the Georgians,” Hewitt says.

As perestroika took effect and the Soviet Union began to unravel, rising nationalism in Georgia led to heightened ethnic tensions. “I began to see increasingly nationalistic, anti-minority rhetoric in a Georgian literary journal I read,” says Hewitt, who by then was an academic at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. “I was fearful of what might happen next.”

Those fears found written expression in his now-infamous 1989 “Open Letter to the Georgian People: A Foreigner’s Observations on the Strained Relations between the Abkhazians and the Georgians”. The nine-page document articulated Hewitt’s concerns about rising ethnic tensions, and made an impassioned plea for mutual understanding. “More things unite you with the Abkhazians than divide you,” it read. “Take advantage of what you hold in common, and, before any more innocent blood is spilled in Georgia, settle your differences with your brothers, since only the interests of your enemies are served by this conflict.”

Against the advice of his wife, Hewitt mailed the letter to Tbilisi. It initially went unpublished in Georgia, but in Abkhazia became the 1989 equivalent of a viral sensation, printed and pinned up on noticeboards for public consumption. After meeting a senior Georgian official, Hewitt sought the politician’s intervention to have the letter published. It eventually was, alongside three vitriolic replies. The best man at Hewitt’s wedding even gave an interview on Georgian television, launching an ad hominem attack against his former friend. “A close contact in Abkhazia told me: ‘George, you do not know what you have done.’ As of 21 July 1989, my relations with Georgia were finished.”

The violence that Hewitt had foreshadowed would finally ignite in August 1992, when Georgian troops arrived in Abkhazia’s capital, Sukhum/i.\* A year later, Abkhazian militias regained their territory, but not before allegations of ethnic cleansing were levelled at each side. The war left tens of thousands dead and an estimated quarter of a million ethnic Georgians displaced from their Abkhazian homeland. But while Abkhazia had won the war, the international community’s refusal to recognise it plunged the territory into isolation.

Immediately following the conflict, Hewitt was appointed Abkhazia’s honorary consul to the U.K. by its first president, Vladislav Ardzinba. Hewitt assumed himself to be “persona non grata” in Georgia, but was invited to a conference in Tbilisi in the late 1990s. While he ultimately decided not to attend, the professor was planning a visit in 2005 when he was sent an excerpt of parliamentary discussions between Georgian politicians and the country’s new ambassador to the U.K. “They asked [the ambassador] how he intended to address the anti-Georgian activities of a Mr George Hewitt in London,” Hewitt recalls. “Since then, I have had no intention of going back to Georgia.” According to Hewitt, Georgian authorities have also repeatedly sought to have him dismissed from his research institution, without success.

Hewitt’s primary responsibility as honorary consul is to prepare travel documents for the small number of Westerners who venture to Abkhazia; Hewitt estimates he issues between 10 and 15 visas a year. The professor also seeks to raise awareness about Abkhazia by publishing and engaging with journalists. “What I do as honorary consul goes hand in hand with my academic activities,” he says. “I often write articles ensuring that the Abkhazian case is correctly presented in academic literature. Am I a scholar or a representative of Abkhazia? Both.” His work has not been well received by the British Foreign Office, which once informed Hewitt that since the U.K. did not recognise Abkhazia, “I had no right to call myself honorary consul and they requested I desist forthwith.”

Since retiring from his University of London post, Hewitt has balanced his honorary consul role with babysitting duties – he has four grandchildren. While Hewitt’s daughters were born in the U.K., he says they are “culturally Abkhazian”; one recently started a business in England selling *adjika*, a spicy sauce beloved by Abkhazians. Despite being a prominent international expert on the Abkhaz language, Hewitt hesitates about his practical speaking abilities. “At a theoretical level I have a good knowledge of Abkhaz, but I am not fluent,” he admits.

Hewitt’s role became even more politically charged in August 2008, when Russia extended recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia – another Georgian breakaway – following the Russian–Georgian War. Moscow’s endorsement was a momentous occasion; Hewitt was in Abkhazia at the time and remembers “cars honking, fireworks and gunshots – the celebrations went on until the early hours.” But while subsequent recognition from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu brought hope that Abkhazia might finally escape the shackles of international isolation, progress has since stalled. Today, the West remains resolute in its support for Georgia.

Although September 2018 will mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abkhazian independence, a resolution to the frozen conflict remains beyond the horizon. “I’m generally pessimistic, not just about Abkhazia but about the world in general – Brexit, Trump, et cetera,” Hewitt quips. Asked whether he thinks Abkhazia will enjoy universal recognition within his lifetime, the academic offers glumly: “I rather doubt it.”

One day, Abkhazia might boast shiny embassies around the world, and tourists may be forced to seek appointments with gruff officials to pay exorbitant visa fees. Until then, visitors to this picturesque post-conflict zone can continue emailing a kindly grandfather in Yorkshire, who is doing his small bit for a distant adopted homeland.

\* The Abkhazian transliteration of their capital city is ‘Sukhum’, while Georgians opt for ‘Sukhumi’. Many academics use ‘Sukhum/i’ to remain neutral. •

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Hewitt reading from a 1912 Abkhaz translation of the Gospels, gifted to him by Abkhazia’s first president.

This page  
Hewitt in 1983, wearing traditional Abkhazian dress (a cherkesska) with an authentic antique dagger (kinjal).

Hewitt issues about 10 colourful Abkhazian visas each year, to British and international visitors.

Abkhazia is situated on the eastern coast of the Black Sea and the south-western side of the Caucasus Mountains.