

The intractable problem of the Abkhazians

'Guests' on their own territory

The melting pot the Soviet leaders aspired to create has been described as a salad bowl. Four writers offer differing views on events in Georgia and Uzbekistan

Anyone who kept abreast of news from the USSR in 1989 must be aware of the desire for national sovereignty among the Kartvelian peoples of Georgia (i.e. Georgians, Mingrelians and Svans, usually referred to, along with the Laz in Turkey, as Georgians).

Immediate sympathies probably lie with a nation of four million who regard themselves as unjustly subjugated by the Tsars (1801-1918) or the Red Army (post-1921). The situation is more complex. The Kartvelians constitute 68.8% of Georgia's population (1979 census). Andrei Sakharov recently described Georgia as one of the USSR's minor empires (*Ogonëk*, 31 July 1989). Thus, it is hardly surprising to see Georgia riddled with the inter-ethnic conflicts which are appearing all over the Union.

Kartvelian opposition to the Communist regime is fragmented among a number of 'informal' groups. Apart from the National Front (headed by Professor Nodar Natadze), they are led by former dissidents: the Helsinki Group (Zviad Gamsakhurdia); Society of Holy Iliia the Just (SHIJ, formed by the late Merab Kostava); Rustaveli Society (Akaki Bakradze); National Democratic Party (NDP, Gia Chanturia). All these groups are united in their hostility to the Abkhazians. After the 9 April killings in Tbilisi, it is impossible to find a single rational voice anywhere in the Georgian media prepared to question anti-Abkhazian propaganda.

The Abkhazians are a north west Caucasian (*not* Turkic) people. Outside Georgia it is generally accepted that they are the indigenous inhabitants of the area. Up to 1864 they were bordered to the north by their relatives, the Ubykhs (around Sochi), whilst their other relatives, the Circassians, occupied the north west Caucasian uplands. Following Russia's capture of the north west Caucasus all the Ubykhs, numerous

Circassians and many Abkhazians migrated to the Ottoman Empire. Several settlements in Abkhazia were thus left vacant, and colonisation began. The population-figures for 1886-1979 are revealing (see Table).

Of the Kartvelian population of 1897, 23,810 were Mingrelians and they remain the vast majority of Kartvelians in Abkhazia. But the Abkhazian-Kartvelian balance from 1897 requires comment. The 1897 Abkhazian figure includes 30,640 residents of Samurzaqano (today the southernmost Gali-region of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic). During the Menshevik period these were arbitrarily reclassified as Kartvelians and this practice was continued in the 1926 census.

When Lavrenti Beria, a Mingrelian from outside Sukhum, came to power in Transcaucasia, he began in 1933 a policy forcibly to 'Georgianise' Abkhazia, which began with the involuntary resettlement into Abkhazia of numerous Mingrelians plus Georgians from Racha and Lechkhumi. Under his successor, Kandid Charkviani (born 1907), and the local party boss, A. Mgeladze, all Abkhazian schools were closed from 1944 to 1953, being replaced by Georgian schools, where children were beaten if heard speaking Abkhaz.

Publishing in Abkhaz ceased. Plans were laid to transport the whole nation to Central Asia, but these were never effected, as it was assumed that enough had been done to assimilate the Abkhazians within a generation — the Gali-region is now virtually devoid of Abkhazians.

Little mention is made by the Kartvelians today of events between 1933-53. 'The resettlement by Stalin-Beria of Rachans and Imeretians in place of Greeks who had been deported, voluntarily repatriated to their homeland or repressed, and of Abkhazians

and Kartvelians who had perished in the dungeons of Dranda or other prisons, was an act performed in the interests of politics ...' (Chabua Amiredzhibi, 22 September 1989). The fact that the 'politics' were those of Georgianisation is ignored. Such authors see no inconsistency in claiming: 'We [Kartvelians] have never in any way trampled the Abkhazians underfoot — we have not even upset them!' Darrell Slider (*Central Asian Review*, 1985) has shown that, despite the reversal in 1953 of many of the worst excesses, Abkhazia continued to be deprived in terms of the *per capita* budget and opportunities for higher education.

Following the request in 1978 to join the Central Russian Federation, Abkhazia was awarded its own university (thereby taking precedence over Batumi) and TV.

This, and the preservation of certain posts for Abkhazians, led many Kartvelians to claim that the Abkhazians are a privileged minority of trouble-makers (cf. First Secretary Givi Gumbaridze's address to the Central Committee Plenum on 19 September 1989). It is seldom remembered that the Abkhazian State University (ASU) in Sukhum consists of three sectors (Abkhazian, Russian, Kartvelian) to serve the needs of any student in West Georgia, so that the Kartvelian sector has always been the largest (around 40%); Abkhazian TV consists of three weekly evening broadcasts from half to one hour's duration. The fact that hardly any Kartvelians work at the Sukhum Research Institute reflects the ignorance of Abkhaz language, literature and history among the local Kartvelian population. It is interesting too that at the end of September Abkhazians were prevented from entering many workplaces (e.g. Sukhum airport) by Kartvelian majorities.

Long-running disenchantment at the lack of significant autonomy from Tbilisi led to the preparation of the 'Abkhazian Letter', an 87-page document signed by 60 leading Abkhazians and submitted to the nineteenth All-Union Party Conference in Moscow on 17 June 1988. Abkhazian grievances against Tbilisi were set out and the request was made for Abkhazia to be granted the status it enjoyed from 1921 to 1931 (i.e. that of a virtual constituent-republic) prior to complete incorporation within Georgia.

Informal groups were formed with the

Part-population figures for Abkhazia, 1886-1979

	1886	1897	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979
Abkhazian	58,960 (85.7%)	58,697 (55.3%)	55,918 (26.4%)	56,197 (18%)	61,193	77,276	83,097 (17.1%)
Kartvelian	4,135	25,875 (24.4%)	67,494 (31.8%)	91,967 (29.59%)	158,221	199,595	213,332 (43.9%)
Russian	971	5,135 (4.8%)	20,456 (9.5%)	60,201 (19.3%)	86,715	92,889	79,730 (16.4%)

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release from prison or the lifting of restrictions on dissidents in 1987-8. The second clause in the Iliá Chavchavadze Society's programme (11 December 1987) reads: 'All questions touching upon Georgia's future must be decided by the will of the majority of the Kartvelian people.' In December 1987 Kostava and Gamsakhurdia were talking of the persecution of Kartvelians and of the Georgian language that they claimed to have occurred in the Autonomous Abkhazian Republic in 1978. The NDP, a radical off-shoot of the Chavchavadze Society, chose as its rallying-cry (30 August 1988) 'Georgia for the Kartvelians'. Clause 12 of its programme stated Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) to be 'Georgia's own historical territory'. Calls for Georgian to become an obligatory subject in Republican schools (articles III.8/9 in the State Programme for the Georgian Language, promulgated in August 1989) contributed to a renewed unease in Abkhazia.

Knowledge of the 'Abkhazian Letter' seems to have permeated to Tbilisi only in February/March 1989. Subsequently the 'Declaration' in Lykhny on 18 March, endorsing the earlier demands and supported by 37,000 signatories (including First Secretary Boris Adleiba, for which he was dismissed), caused a backlash throughout Georgia. Both documents were castigated as 'libels of the Kartvelians'. Meetings were held on 25 March, 1 and 2 April by Kostava, where shouts of 'Let there be blood!' were heard from the floor, and on 8 April by Akaki Bakradze, when the banner 'Fear not — your mother's blood will be with you!' was displayed.

An anti-Abkhazian campaign, conducted by leading writers and academics and designed to deprive the Abkhazians of their legitimate history, blossomed in the media. The most 'generous' position is that, while



Ceausescu as seen by Pancho

Abkhazians are permitted aboriginal status in Abkhazia, the territory is Kartvelian, because Kartvelian speakers have always shared it (Professor M. Lortkipanidze). Some speak of two kinds of Abkhazians — the Christians, who cleave to Georgian culture and are deprived of their rights, versus the Moslems (Tariel Chanturia).

The vilest theory disseminates with renewed vigour the fantasy of Pavle Ingoroqva, whose inventions date from the late 1940s, that the Abkhazians only came to Abkhazia in the 17th century — the term 'Abkhaz' derived by dialect distortion from an old Kartvelian tribe (*moskhi*) no longer resident there! The Abkhazologist Ketevan Lomtadze demonstrated the absurdity of this in a 1956 review.

Ingoroqva's book and similar abuses of scholarship are planned for republication — for example, Gamsakhurdia in his Open Letter to Sakharov (6 and 12 September 1989) cites N. Berdzenishvili's (unexpur-

gated) volume VIII as source for the 'fact' that the Abkhazians migrated only two centuries ago; this same 'fact' is unashamedly adduced by Professor E. Mamistvalishvili in his own Open Letter to Sakharov (28 August 1989). The Kartvelian informals now use the Abkhazians' self-designation 'Apswa' to refer to them, thereby implying that they are not 'Abkhazians'. A. Bakradze has allegedly informed Mingrelians in Sukhum that they are the descendants of the 'true' Abkhazians.

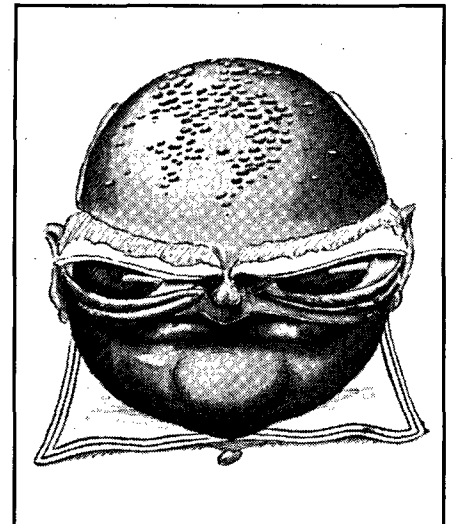
Regardless of positions on this question, all apparently agree that the 'Kingdom of Abkhazia' (in the 8th-10th centuries) was a Kartvelian state, that Abkhazia is an indivisible part of Georgia, and that the current population-balance in Abkhazia is not the result of Beria's policy (M. Lortkipanidze, 6 June 1989; G. Giorgadze *et al.*, 26 July 1989; Ch. Amiredzhibi, 22 September 1989). Such disparagement is an everyday occurrence in the Georgian-language media. The Abkhazians have as outlets only their local (limited) TV, the Abkhaz-language paper *Red Abkhazia* and the North Abkhazian paper *Bzyp* — the Georgian-language *Soviet Abkhazia* is hostile, and the Russian-language *Soviet Abkhazia* suspect; they certainly have no way of presenting their case outside Abkhazia.

The attempt by Tbilisi State University (TSU) and the Higher Education Ministry to remove the Kartvelian sector of the ASU and turn it into a branch of TSU led to the killings in Abkhazia on 15 and 16 July 1989 — 16 July was the day designated for the submission of admission-documents, as announced on 7 July by the Georgian-language "*Soviet Abkhazia*". Had it succeeded Sukhum would have two racially divided universities, leading ultimately to the demise of the weakened ASU. The commission appointed by the Supreme Soviet to examine the need for this branch judged it unnecessary.

One of the members was the linguist,

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Professor V. Ivanov, who, interviewed by the BBC, blamed the conflict on the Kartvelian population. He was branded an 'inciter' (M. Gabunia, 1 August 1989). Of the commission Georgian TV declared: 'Bloodshed was the logical result of the commission's non-objectivity, and the members bear responsibility for it' (Khundadze, 19 July 1989). In similar vein Deputy V. Ardzinba was warned that he would be held responsible for further blood-letting, since he dared to state the Abkhazian case at the new Moscow Congress (Giorgadze *et al*, 26 July 1989).

Even Sakharov is not free from the personal abuse that is flung freely at all who speak out against the Georgians — G. Petriashvili's contribution was: 'Poor old Brezhnev. How couldn't he realise it wasn't a quarrel you wanted but were offering him a better path for imperial development?' (6 September 1989). Gamsakhurdia blamed Sakharov's negative attitude to the Georgian informals on Elena Bonner (6 and 12 September 1989). A Mingrelian lady, T. Bokuchava, who tried to cool tempers in April, was attacked in *Literary Georgia* for being ignorant of Georgian.

The problem of Abkhazia is blamed either on Moscow playing its Abkhazian trump to thwart the Georgian nationalist movement (Gamsakhurdia); or on an Islamic plot to rouse the Abkhazians, for whom religion is not relevant and the Azerbaijanis in South Georgia against Georgian Christians — even the Meskh(et)ians in Ferghana are involved in this paranoia (Dzh. Charkviani, 4 August 1989). Gia Chanturia claims non-involvement in ethnic disputes, which is belied by his party's two-page 'Declaration' (18 July 1989) where the authorities were given until 15 August to resolve the Abkhazian crisis, otherwise widespread strikes were threatened. This document caused alarm among Abkhazians. Kostava (9 August 1989) extended this deadline to 1

Popkov's notes

The journalist Viktor Alekseevich Popkov spent summer 1989 in Abkhazia in the village of Tamsh. The following are a few extracts from the manuscript of his book *Unity*, describing in detail the events in Abkhazia.

'What we all feared has happened . . . Abkhazians and Georgians are fighting in Sukhum. 10 kilometres from Sukhum the road was blocked (15 July). They were letting pass only cars carrying Georgian nationals. When an elderly Georgian learned I was from the magazine *Ogonek*, he agreed to take me through. From the cinema *Abkhazia* we had to go on foot, as the road was blocked again by men armed with planks and axes. It proved impossible to reach the centre. There was a battered bus with all its windows smashed. I was told the Abkhazian passengers had been firing on the people. As a result of halting the bus with trucks, two passengers had been killed. If indeed they had opened fire on the Georgians while surrounded by them, this would have been an insane act of suicide. The dead were the father and uncle of Edik Lasuria, who told me how the bus had been entered by armed Georgians. Firing and a fight ensued. Although police-

officers with automatic weapons had been standing close by, they had made no effort to intervene.

'The river Ghalidzga on the edge of Ochamchira . . . unexpectedly became a frontier-river. Ochamchira's First Secretary, S. Baghaphsh, realising the potential danger to Abkhazia from the stirred up regions of West Georgia around whose centre Zugdidi . . . arranged for a post of the State Automobile Inspectorate (GAI) to be set up on the bridge . . . to stop all untimetabled buses and other suspect vehicles by which the Georgian informal group leaders could get their people over . . . In case this should be insufficient to prevent the torrent from the other side, Baghaphsh with foresight ordered the preparation of lorries with which the bridge could be blockaded if necessary . . .

In regions of West Georgia, which suffered no direct threat, police departments were being raided — the population found in their hands a huge quantity of military weapons . . . It later transpired according to more accurate information that the throng (massed on the Gali side of the Ghalidzga) amounted to over 20,000 people from many regions of West Georgia, even as far away as Kutaisi . . . Baghaphsh and others were subsequently relieved of their posts . . . ■

September, by which date the informals' *bête-noire*, Ozgan, First Secretary in Gudauta, and Baghaphsh in Ochamchira had been dismissed.

Gamsakhurdia's *Chronicle 4* takes the form of an 'Open Letter to the Kartvelians of North West Georgia (Abkhazia)' and is written in the name of the Georgian intelligentsia, the SHIJ, the NDP and the Georgian Helsinki Group. It is a 23-page directive to the Mingrelians on how to conduct anti-Abkhazian agitation. The period 1936-54 is lauded for reducing separatist-activity and coercion of other nations by the 'Apswa' (p17). Page 12 includes: 'You must write open letters to citizens of Tbilisi, Kutaisi and others, familiarise them with your difficulties, unveil the veiled and the coercion of Apswa separatists — seek support in your just struggle. If invited guests pay you no attention, shame them for their inactivity'.

The informals claim that ethnic problems will be resolved once Georgia achieves independence, but, when Professor Revaz Mishveladze urged the need to increase Georgia's Kartvelian population to 95% in the shortest possible time, as Georgia can only tolerate 5% of 'guests' (29 July 1989), the concern of Georgia's ethnic minorities can be appreciated.

Given the extent of provocation it is

surprising that clashes were avoided for so long. Following the killings on 15 and 16 July, anti-Abkhazian demagoguery intensified (e.g. Nodar Natadze's comments on the main Georgian TV news on 18 July), and the Abkhazians stand accused of a premeditated assault. From the nature of weaponry in Kartvelian hands at 6am in Sukhum on 16 July, eye-witness Viktor Popkov concludes it was the Kartvelians who had prepared in advance.

The future looks bleak. The seeds of distrust have been sown so widely that the social fabric is disintegrating and even Abkhazo-Kartvelian marriages are breaking up. Only saturation soldiering kept the peace during the summer of 1989. The Abkhazians have no protector but the Kremlin. In September many Abkhazians started strikes and hunger-strikes, but no publicity was given to these in Georgia.

What happened under Beria and Charkviani is still vivid in the memory of many Abkhazians, and it is disturbing that in the period of *glasnost* it is Beria's policies that the Kartvelians are striving to revive in Abkhazia. It would be marvellous if one could agree with Akaki Gelovani (9 August 1989) that it is because of the Kartvelians' high culture and morality that national pride is foreign to them. ■

(Author's name withheld)

