

JONATHAN COHEN (ed.): *A question of sovereignty. The Georgia-Abkhazia peace process*. Issue 7 1999 of *Accord. An international review of peace initiatives*. 98 pp. London: Conciliation Resource. £15.

The editor has been grappling with this particular dispute since his days at the NGO International Alert. Alert, having despatched a poorly chosen team to the war-zone in the early months of the fighting (Oct-Nov 1992), had produced a deplorably biased report in January 1993, for which anti-Abkhazian publication the organisation's then-director (Kumar Rupesinghe) felt obliged to apologise one month later to the Abkhazian delegation attending that year's International Negotiating Network conference at the Carter Center (Atlanta, Georgia, USA). It was as Alert was having to deal with this negative Abkhazian reaction that Cohen joined them and quickly managed to introduce a more balanced approach. This exemplary even-handedness has continued to characterise his involvement during his time at Conciliation Resources, and, buttressed by an ever deepening understanding of the conflict, it puts him in an excellent position to contribute to ongoing attempts to resolve this bitter and complex problem.

The present volume, dedicated to Martin Schümer, another valued friend of the peace-process, brings together for the benefit of those needing a quick appreciation of the dispute and its background short articles by a variety of commentators; there are also the English versions of some key-texts relating to the peace-process, a chronology of important historical events, profiles of three of the main political figures, descriptions of some relevant institutional players, a bibliography (not all items on which would find a place on my own list of recommended reading), plus a selection of pictures, charts and maps. A crucial change here (p. 97), however, is that the main Abkhazian website should now be consulted at: www.apsny.org (not: www.abkhazia.org). Christine Bell's Foreword compares moves to establish a Georgian-Abkhazian peace-agreement with others around the world. The editor's Introduction sums up the current stalemate of 'no war -- no peace'. Bruno Coppieters, who himself has been an assiduous Belgian agent for facilitating joint-meetings to seek constitutional arrangements for a settlement, looks at the roots of the conflict. Ghia Nodia, a frequent spokesman for the Georgian side at Western gatherings, again provides a Georgian perspective. Lara Olson's single page reminds readers of Georgia's earlier ethnic war in the province of South Ossetia. The Abkhazian case is comprehensively put by Liana K'varchelia, one-time lecturer in English at Sukhum University but who now works with Abkhazian NGOs. Cohen's second piece examines the role of economics in helping or hindering a settlement, whilst Paula Garb, whose long-time scholarly interest in Abkhazia has prompted her too to play an active part in the search for reconciliation, describes how, despite the hostilities, the sides have continued their joint-operation of the Ingur hydro-electric

plant for mutual advantage. The first holder of Oxford's Lester B. Pearson Chair in International Relations, Neil MacFarlane, discusses the role of the UN, whereas that of Russia is Dmitrii Danilov's theme. Susan Allen Nan (George Mason University) looks at civic initiatives, and appended to this are two paragraphs, one giving the Georgian view by P'aat'a Zakareishvili, the other from Liana K'varchelia again offering the Abkhazian -- the function of NGOs is not fully understood in either community, to the extent that those prepared to sit down with representatives from the opposing camp regularly arouse hostility from their fellow-nationals. Greg Hansen, a former UN volunteer, deals with the plight of the (Kartvelian) refugees displaced to Georgia proper.

The editor has managed to squeeze a great deal of valuable information into the space available, making the volume a most useful quick-reference tool. Some pertinent observations do, however, suggest themselves for the benefit of those new to the quarrel.

Readers hoping that Danilov's topic would provide an opportunity for a clear statement on Russia's widely alleged involvement in the generation and/or prosecution of the conflict will be disappointed. The familiar charge that Russia assisted the Abkhazians appears several times throughout the work, but nowhere does one read either of parallel Abkhazian suspicions that Yeltsin both knew about in advance and approved of Shevardnadze's plans to invade Abkhazia on 14 August 1992 or of Russian military action on behalf of Georgia (such as the bombing of Abkhazian positions in the final days of the war). For a full appreciation of the ultimate causes of the conflict, one really has to burrow a little deeper than attempted by Coppieters. Also, I experienced some difficulty deciding when this contributor was repeating someone else's argument or expressing his own view. For example, on page 17 we are told: 'The key to the solution of the conflict is therefore to be found in Moscow', whilst the next page offers: 'To say that the key to the solution of the conflict is to be found in Moscow distracts attention from a serious discussion of the difficulties in overcoming the antagonistic relations that both communities have been building over a long period'. When he claims that the Abkhazian government 'also has to find legitimacy among the Armenian, Russian and Greek communities in Abkhazia' (p. 17), I feel he forgets that these communities were targeted by the invading forces just as much as the Abkhazians themselves (all being non-Kartvelian), which is why representatives of these ethnic groups remaining in Abkhazia largely support the government in power in the republic. Surely correct, however, is the article's closing prediction: 'It may be years before all those who consider Abkhazia to be their homeland are able to accept the simple truth that dialogue and accommodation may be more rewarding than the present stalemate' --

it is a pity that the Georgian authorities decided to respond exclusively with military force to the Abkhazians' legitimate and sensible proposals for a new post-Soviet *modus vivendi*, published prior to the war in the summer of 1992.

Nodia begins by acknowledging that the downgrading of Abkhazia from a union-republic with treaty-ties to Georgia to an autonomous republic within Georgia by Georgia's most famous son, Stalin, in 1931 could be deemed 'Georgian aggression' but suggests that Georgia's true claims to the territory reside in the earlier 1921 Constitution drawn up during Georgia's three years of independence (1918-21) under the Mensheviks -- about the forced annexation to Georgia of Abkhazia by Gen. Mazniev (Mazniashvili) in 1918 (condemned by a contemporary British traveller, Eric Bechhofer) he stays silent. Georgia may have 'justified' its 1992 incursion into Abkhazia 'by the need to guard communication links', but the threats to the sole railway-line between Georgia and Russia came not from Abkhazia but from neighbouring Mingrelia (Samegrelo in MacFarlane's Georgian parlance on p. 38), seething at the time with anti-Shevardnadze Zviadists, as I can personally testify, having spent three weeks an hour's drive north of the border with Mingrelia just one month before the war began. The term 'ethnic cleansing' rears its head on p. 22 -- in reference not to the treatment of the non-Kartvelian residents of that part of Abkhazia under the 14-month Georgian occupation but to the flight of the majority of local Kartvelians at the end of the war. Since this largely occurred BEFORE the arrival of Abkhazian and allied forces (as clearly stated in the second report on the war from The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation, The Hague -- see also the Report of the UN Human Rights' Mission to Abkhazia of late 1993), it can be properly styled 'cleansing' only if a qualifying 'self-' is prefixed. Nodia thinks that 'the hostilities of May 1998 emphasize the need for' adequate security-guarantees to be provided for any refugees choosing to return to (the Gal province of) Abkhazia, which would imply that the Abkhazians bear the blame for the fighting that then took place, a fine example of the pot calling the kettle black, for no clashes would have occurred, had not insurgents crossed the Ingur in a concerted attempt to wrest Gal from Abkhazian control. Most observers will be stunned to hear that 'Georgia's major concession regarding status has been to accept a federal solution' (p. 23), for, as Cohen remarks (p. 12) 'confederal, federal and autonomy-based solutions have been proposed', and, in the words of K'varchelia (p. 30) Georgia's 'federal model...differs little from the pre-war period' (in other words, the status to be 'conceded' to Abkhazia is tantamount to the failed autonomy imposed on it in 1931). It is, nevertheless, encouraging to discover that 'many Georgians consider the launching of the war in Abkhazia in 1992 to have been a mistake' (p. 24) -- what a pity that not a single voice (influential or otherwise) was raised in Tbilisi against this insane move at the time. The philosopher Nodia has written

elsewhere about 'national projects' (p. 24) to characterise the ways in which nations collectively define themselves, and an admirably detailed study by Vivien Law on 'Language myths and the discourse of nation-building in Georgia' is available for those bemused by this topic -- vid. Graham Smith et al. (eds.) 'Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities' (CUP, 1998, 167-196).

MacFarlane is rather negative in his assessment of the UN Secretary-General's first envoy to the conflict, Swiss ambassador to France, Eduard Brunner (someone who was evidently not to the taste of the Georgians for his somewhat untypical immunity to their blandishments): 'In the early years of negotiation matters were not helped by the passive attitude taken by the Special Envoy' (p. 38). And yet a few lines further on he notes that 'the more proactive approach adopted by [Brunner's successor] Liviu Bota has also not produced a settlement', which rather obviates the criticism of Brunner. Correctly observing that a 1994 agreement gave Abkhazia the right to vet applications from refugees wishing to return from Georgia (the reference to this measure by Hansen on p. 60 does not make clear whether this author appreciates that such a clause was part and parcel of the accords), MacFarlane laments that only 311 families were sanctioned for return -- whilst this may have been the number of official returnees, no mention is made of the fact that approved applicants often failed to turn up for repatriation at the designated time, which must call into question the sincerity of their desire for repatriation. The author also ignores the goodwill-gesture of the Abkhazian authorities in agreeing to register all the (over 60,000) spontaneous and thus unofficial returnees of 1995-7. It is unclear whether MacFarlane is imputing any of the blame for attacks on the Kartvelian population of Gal to terrorist-infiltrators from Georgia, where much of it certainly lies, when he speaks on p. 39 of 'substantial and repeated violations of the human rights of the civilian population'. But the statement on the same page that 'The Abkhaz de facto authorities then renewed their attacks of [sic -- GH] the returning Georgian population in May 1998, leading to further mass displacement' is a bizarre description of the large-scale armed incursion from Georgia that occasioned a predictably firm Abkhazian response to defend Abkhazia's territorial integrity. Despite frequent Western misreporting that Abkhazia had declared itself independent of Georgia both prior to and during the war, this formal act only occurred as recently as October 1999 in the wake of the presidential elections and referendum, which renders the comment 'the Abkhaz have retreated from the objective of full independence' (p. 40) rather unfortunate. Readers may ponder whether the UN's role would not have been a worthier one, had it done more actually to stop the bloodshed in Abkhazia caused by its newest member-state rather than giving comfort to the aggressor by reducing 'the sense of isolation and desperation on the Georgian side' through its presence in those early days (p. 41).

I believe that Hansen's assertion that 'the fight between West and East Georgia was discontinued in late 1992 so that all could join in the fighting in Abkhazia' is factually inaccurate, insofar as the Mingrelian supporters of the deposed president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, himself a Mingrelian (and Hansen is to be congratulated for mentioning Mingrelians in the context of the Kartvelian refugees, though he is wrong to place them after the Georgians, as Mingrelians vastly outnumbered the latter), did not on the whole engage in anti-Abkhazian action. I have myself, however, argued that it was Shevardnadze's woeful miscalculation that he would rally even Zviadists to his banner by finding a 'common' foe for all Kartvelians to fight that led him to invade Abkhazia (with all its disastrous consequences) in the first place.

Coupled with the above-remarks, the present volume may be left to speak positively for itself, throwing, as it does, much needed light on one long-standing conflict in the Caucasus that the international community largely prefers either to neglect (compare Chechnia) or to view through Georgian eyes -- stances which essentially are likely to prolong rather than solve the dispute in question.

George Hewitt

Dear Jonathan,

Thanks for the message. Good to hear that 5 of the 9 vols have left these shores and that the others will soon follow.

As it happens, I didn't append an errata-list to that particular review, but I give below what would have appeared had I done so.

p.17 col.2, halfway down: 'The key to the solution of the conflict is therefore to be found in Moscow' -- whose view is this? (I often have this trouble with what Bruno writes -- is he ascribing a view to some notion that he's quoting or giving it as his own opinion?); 1.7up: Supsa (surely, instead of Poti); p.19 col.1, 1.4: historicAL; p.20 bottom: the locus of unrest at this period was MINGRELIA, so how does that justify action in Abkhazia? p.23 col.1, 2nd para: 'Georgia's major concession...' -- I thought that it was merely 'the broadest type of autonomy imaginable' that Shevy has been offering by way of "concession" (viz. nothing other than the old Soviet hierarchy) -- cf. the start of Liana's article; p.24 col.1, 1.4: partnership' OR initially; p.38 col.2: what about the level of UNofficial returnees? p.39 col.2, 1.26up: attacks oN; p.44 col.1: why 'to demarcate the territory taken in battle'? -- surely it was to validate their long-standing border with Mingrelia; p.58: since there is recognition by this author of some difference between Georgians and Mingrelians, shouldn't Mingrelians be mentioned first in the list of refugees, as they predominated? Personally I'd put 'allegedly forced flight'; p.60 col.1: the screening of the returnees was actually PART of the agreement; p.61 col.2, top: the statement that Georgia's REAL civil war came to an end in late 1992 is just not true; p.80: surely no part of Georgia became a protectorate of Russia as such until 1801 -- wasn't the point of the Georgievsk Treaty that there was an understanding of mutual support in the face of attack, which was signally ignored when the Persians attacked Tbilisi in 1895? Maybe worth checking the wording; p.81 col.1: why single out Georgians as suffering purges at this period, and in what way were they

at that period being russified? p.86 col.2: EliAva; p.89: Shevy was never head of the KGB -- that honour went to Inauri at that time; p.91: are you sure that it was an 'Abkhaz-only National Guard'? p.97 top of final col: can it be <http://www.apsny.org>?

I'll see if I can copy the Shnirelman on Abkhazia before you go.

There's a day's seminar in Istanbul on 6 Oct devoted to how the N. Caucasians (Circassians/Abkhazians) can benefit from their new legislative freedom to teach their native languages. I've been invited and am looking to get a cheap ticket at short notice -- any ideas?

Zaira's mother died yesterday, which rather clouds the final days of summer...

Yours, George

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