

## **The North Caucasus: Minorities at a Crossroads**

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'The North Caucasus could become a new test case. In terms of minority issues, the North Caucasus is probably the (...) region in Europe with the highest potential for long term conflict. If the situation is not addressed shortly, the region is at risk of becoming the scene for ongoing violence and instability'. Such is the sixth paragraph of this timely publication, which appeared in December 1994, the very month in which Yeltsin's «democratic» regime initiated the mass-bombing of Grozny.

Rather than addressing the situation in the North Caucasus, the typically feeble response of especially the American Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, and the British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, which latter on Radio 4's 'World at One' on 20 January 1995 described the assault on Chechnia merely as 'a setback on the road to reform' and was able to conjure up just one reason why Yeltsin deserved continuing Western support, to wit that he had acted bravely in jumping onto a tank in Moscow in August 1991 [sic!], proves beyond a shadow of doubt (if anyone still harboured any, that is) that one can expect no spontaneous defence of minority rights from either the British Foreign Office or the American State Department. Indeed, one must seriously wonder whether, had the Allies been aware of how Beria and his NKVD thugs were using Lend-Lease Studebakers (Conquest 1993:258) to round up the North Caucasian Karachay, Balkars, Chechens and Ingush for mass-deportation eastwards in 1943/44, similar pusillanimous excuses would have been found to avoid criticising Stalin's genocidal experiment, the 50th anniversary of which is «celebrated» by Yeltsin's current variation on his predecessor's theme. It is hardly surprising, then, to read in a recent novel that has the North Caucasus as its backcloth of 'a Western leadership that in its dealings with the rest of the world has proclaimed moral indifference to be its decent Christian right' (John le Carré **Our Game** p.213).

If minority rights are going to be taken seriously by a world whose decision-making bodies, whether in terms of governments or organisations like the UN, seem to be solely concerned with the well-being of *states* (whose authorities are usually responsible for the grievances of ethnic minorities), then pressure is going to have to come from the bottom up (viz. lobbying from individuals, the

media, human rights' organisations, etc...). Before this can happen, information has to be available about far away places and their little known inhabitants, for whose welfare self-serving politicians manifestly care not one jot. The present pamphlet can, therefore, play a very important part in bringing the realities of the (North) Caucasus to the conscience of a largely ignorant world and is thus to be welcomed.

The multiplicity of peoples in this unique ethnic patchwork on the very fringes of Europe are described in terms of ethnicity, language and religion; a brief history is offered along with a summary of the developments in the region in the years leading up to and following the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the conflicts between the North Ossetians and the Ingush over the Prigorodnyj Raion, which was never handed back to the Ingush after their return in the late 1950s from Central Asian exile, as well as those involving North Caucasians living in the Transcaucasus, specifically the South Ossetians' war with the Georgians under the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia and that between the Abkhazians and the Georgians under Eduard (expediently baptised 'Giorgi') Shevardnadze, whose regime differs in no way from that of his predecessor in respect of its treatment of minorities under its internationally recognised jurisdiction -- little wonder, then, that Shevardnadze, alone of world-leaders, has enthusiastically supported Yeltsin's barbaric behaviour towards the Chechens in their struggle to establish their right to self-determination (most recently in a *Newsweek* interview, quoted by Reuter on 11 April). Allusion is correctly made to the diminution of status enjoyed by the various republics of the present Russian Federation according to Yeltsin's 1993 constitution in comparison with their 'sovereign' status in the Soviet period, which meant that, in theory at least, each republic had the right to secede, the very right exercised by Chechenia, which never signed any treaty with the post-Soviet version of this Federation. Important also are the references to the paradox that, whilst Moscow insists on its right to hold onto the North Caucasian territories that its Tsarist antecedent only gained by dint of war bloodily waged for most of the 19th century, the typical Russian attitude toward the Caucasian peoples themselves has today taken on dangerously racist overtones, such that now the phrase 'A person of Caucasian nationality' is a widespread discriminatory expression in Russia» (p.39).

Among the sensible Proposals For Action at the end one reads: «It is recommended that a history commission, with the participation of international expertise, should be established (...) to compile an accurate objective description of the history of the peoples and the region». The reason offered is that: «The

most disastrous legacy from the Soviet period is the unwritten history of peoples and regions. Too many blank spots in history create myths and unscientific claims». On the basis of my experiences in this field in connection with the Georgian-Abkhaz dispute, I would differ somewhat from this rather generous assessment -- it is not that the absence of a proper history has given rise to dangerous myths, but rather that a deliberately false history has been created that is favourable to the republican (in this case Georgian) authorities (examples could no doubt be duplicated from other former union-republics). In the collapse of communism one naively hoped that scholars would abandon the nefarious practices the previous regime had fostered; instead, one found that historians and linguists have been not only prepared but actually keen to prostitute their disciplines in order to infect a new generation with the earlier falsehoods (see my responses to two such exercises: Hewitt 1992 and 1993). There is most assuredly a role for Western objectivity in this regard, and it must start by all such conscious attempts to mislead being unreservedly condemned by any Western specialist possessed of the knowledge to do so: to turn the modern-day politician's universal blind eye and remain silent is to concur in the abuse of scholarship and to share the guilt for the consequences.

I also wholeheartedly endorse the further recommendation: *International arbitration in solving armed conflicts in Azerbaijan and Georgia should include pressure on both countries to secure cultural and language rights for all minorities not only those directly involved in armed conflicts*. This 'pressure' is exactly what the ill-informed and floundering West failed to impose on Georgia when it had a golden opportunity to do so, namely in the period between Shevardnadze's return in March 1992 and the elections which 'legitimised' his regime on 11 October that year. Instead of holding out the promise of recognition, membership of the UN, World Bank, IMF, etc... on the strict condition that he settled Gamsakhurdia's war in South Ossetia and met the justifiable demands of other regions like Abkhazia, Mingrelia and the Armenian and Azerbaijani populated areas of Georgia, all means of exerting positive pressure were lost when Shevardnadze was allowed to gobble up all these carrots in the weeks following his taking up the position as head of the quite illegal State Council. The result was that he celebrated Georgia's admission to the UN with the armed invasion of Abkhazia, a war that cost many more lives than the previous blood-letting in South Ossetia: the still unresolved aftermath means that this cost is still mounting. Equally, human-rights' activists in Russia, like Yelena Bonner, have urged the West only to consider humanitarian assistance to Russia in the wake of the brutality unleashed in Chechnia -- the

IMF and World Bank obviously think they know better, in view of loans passed to Moscow in total disregard of such pleas!

The authors, neither of whom is a long-time Caucasologist, have done a remarkable job in mastering their brief and presenting the complexities of their topic in a digestible form for a non-specialist audience. Some more precise details of the territorial carve-ups that have been effected in this region over the last hundred years and which are detailed in another impressive report (namely C.W. Blandy's **Compendium of Conflict in the Caucasus, Brief 2, Drivers of Instability in the Caucasus**, Soviet Studies Research Centre, RMA Sandhurst 8(2), March 1993) would have been a valuable enhancement, but there is sufficient here, including a list of the more large-scale boundary-shifts (p.12), for the publication to stand on its own merits. However, given the intricacies of so much that has happened in the Caucasus coupled with the newness of the area to the authors, it would have been amazing, if the odd error or lack of precision had not crept in. I now turn to these, treating the points on Abkhazia last.

The list of peoples at the head of page 6 has no mention of the Jews; however, on page 23 two paragraphs are devoted to 'Mountain Jews or Tat', who are described as: «A Caucasian people who live primarily in the urban centres of Dag(h)estan and Kabardino-Balkaria». This is somewhat at odds with what Bennigsen and Wimbush say of the Tats: «The group is divided into three separate religious communities. First are the Jewish Tats or 'mountain Jews' (*Dagh Churik*), established mainly in southern Daghestan... Second are the Christian Tats of the Armeno-Gregorian faith, established in the villages of Matrosa (Shemakha district) and Kilvan (Divichi district). And third are the Muslim Tats (Shi'a), living mainly in Baku» [1985.220], from which one concludes that Tats include Mountain Jews and that the terms, thus, cannot be synonymous, as seems to be implied.

The description of alphabet-creation by the early Soviets on page 12 is too condensed for full accuracy: «Languages were standardized, and new alphabets in Latin script constructed, paving the way for further changes.» In the Caucasus, apart from Ingush and Abaza, which used Roman scripts from the inception of their literary history in 1923 and 1932 respectively, the Roman alphabets introduced from the mid-20s for the Soviet Union's so-called Young Written Languages replaced the scripts that had been devised/continued in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of Soviet power, which for the relevant

Caucasian languages were either Arabic- or Cyrillic-based. Later on page 12 a further shift is dated to 1938-40, whilst on page 18 it is stated: «It was only in the 1940s [error in both cases for 1930s -- BGH] that the Russian alphabet was introduced.» The shift to Cyrillic took place between 1936 and 1938, affecting all the relevant languages of the Caucasus EXCEPT Abkhaz and the Ossetian of South Ossetia (an Autonomous Region, not Republic, as stated on page 15, within Georgia), both of which in 1938 were forced to adopt Georgian-based scripts; this surely needs to be stated, as it is rather crucial to a full appreciation of the history of the relations between Abkhazians and South Ossetians, on the one hand, and the Georgians, on the other hand.

I am not aware of any territorial dispute between Georgia and the North Caucasus stemming from land given to the former in the wake of the North Caucasian wartime deportations (p.13), for by the time of the return of the dispossessed peoples Georgia had lost its Kremlin supremo(s) and had to return what it had received. Perhaps the authors have in mind the problem of the Meskh(et)ians, who were deported from the Georgian-Turkish border region of Meskhethi in 1944 and have never been allowed to return home by the Georgian [sic] authorities. If some other territorial problem is indeed meant, I think the details should be given.

Footnote 4 to Table 2 on page 14 mentions a figure of 120,000 Ossetian refugees in North Ossetia having fled from South Ossetia. Since the pre-war (1989) Ossetian population of South Ossetia was only 65,195 (out of a total Ossetian population in Georgia that year of 164,009), this figure, whose accuracy I do not query, must be made of refugees not only from South Ossetia but also from other regions of Georgia, which is entirely to be expected, given the extent of the racism that exploded there from the late 1980s.

The reference on page 19 to the Circassian Shapsug(h)s deriving their ethnonym «from their original way of income -- horse-breeding» is one I have not been able to confirm in any other source, and it looks suspiciously like a piece of folk-etymology. Equally suspicious is the statement on page 20 that: «Avar claim descendancy from nomadic Avars, who reached the region in the first centuries AD.», and, one might add, are now lost to history. Today's Caucasian Avars, who, of course, do NOT speak a Turkic language, call themselves **Maṣarula** 'Mountaineers'; addressing the origin of the term 'Avar' to describe Daghestan's most numerous Caucasian tribe, Chikobava and Cercvadze in their 1962 Georgian grammar of Avar state: «The origin of this term is unclear. A

connection with the Turkic tribe 'Avars' (the 'Obry' of the Russian chronicles), well known, in history, is excluded» (p.2).

The Veinakh or Nakh (= 'our people' or just 'people' in all three of the relevant languages) language-family comprises not only Chechen and Ingush, as mentioned on page 20, but also the Bats (in Georgian Ts'ova-Tush) language, spoken by a few thousand speakers in the single East Georgian village of Zemo Alvani, where this unwritten/untaught language is surely destined to become extinct within the next century as a result of georgianisation. The Chechens' self-designation is *Мæккæтæ*, that of the Ingush *Гъæдгъæтæ*, that of the Bats *Æацæтæ*; the better known international designations for the first two deriving from Russian adaptations of the names of two local villages (auls) where Russians first came upon speakers of these two languages.

The Georgian term for Georgia is **sakartvelo**, not with initial 'Z' as in Footnote 11, where it is also erroneously claimed that the term 'Georgia' derives from the country's patron-saint -- it has nothing to do with St. George.

Linguists would be surprised to learn from Footnote 35 that: «Today languages are no longer grouped genetically but typologically.» In fact, typology is merely an additional facet of language-study; in no way has typological classification replaced the still primary grouping by genetic affiliation.

### Abkhazia

It is a pleasure to see on page 13 the contrast drawn between Russia's and Georgia's treatment of their autonomies in 1990: whilst all the North Caucasian autonomous units were allowed to upgrade their status to that of full republics, the Georgian authorities shewed no inclination to tolerate the same for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is true that in late 1990 Gamsakhurdia actually abolished South Ossetian autonomy altogether, and since then Georgian sources regularly refer to the region at best as 'so-called South Ossetia', preferring to downplay any sort of foreign entitlement to the land by using only the Georgian terms **samačablo** 'Fiefdom of the Machabeli family' or **šida kartli** 'Inner Kartli' -- interestingly in a secret missive, published in *საერთაშორისო მხარე* on 18 April, which Shevardnadze sent to Yeltsin on 9 March 1995 to suggest how the two governments could cooperate to impose an agreement on both these areas of recent bloodshed the correct term 'South Ossetia' was employed! Thus began in earnest Gamsakhurdia's Ossetian war, which petered out with both sides exhausted in the summer of 1992, since when tripartite Georgian-Russian-

Ossetian forces have kept a peace which is buttressed by no political settlement. The war is mistakenly said on page 35 to have started in 1992. As for Abkhazia, it was legislative acts subsequent to 1990 that abolished their status as an autonomous republic within Georgia, which the Georgian Stalin had imposed upon them in 1931 and which had been most recently defined in the 1978 Georgian constitution, overturned when Tbilisi decided to reinstate its Menshevik constitution. On page 36 we read that this last constitution did not mention Abkhazia, and Sukhum felt the need to safeguard Abkhazia's position by temporarily reinstating its own constitution of the 1920s (actually published in 1925), when Abkhazia had the status of a full Soviet republic. Georgians point out that Article 107 of their Menshevik constitution does indeed make mention of Abkhazia -- the English translation, published in Paris in 1953, reads: «Abkhasie (district of Soukhoum), Georgia Musulman (district of Batum), and Zakathala (district of Zakhatala), which are integral parts of the Georgian Republic, enjoy an autonomy in the administration of their affairs.» When Abkhazians speak of the need to reinstate their 1925 constitution, they say that this was essential because the Menshevik constitution of Georgia made no mention of Abkhazia as an object of state-judicial relations, meaning by this that the precise nature of the relationship with Tbilisi was not laid down, and historian-cum-politician Stanislav Lakoba has pointed out (p.c.) that it was only as a result of intense pressure that Abkhazia gained even this minimal mention in Article 107 at all.

The 1989 census-data are quoted on page 35, where 44% of Abkhazia's population were registered as 'Georgian'. Immediately after this ethnonym the authors place the word 'Kartvelian' in brackets. Whilst the native Georgian term for 'Georgian (person)' is *ქართველი* the term 'Kartvelian' in English has a different force -- it refers generically to all four of the peoples (viz. Georgians, Mingrelians, Laz, and Svans) who speak the four Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) languages, for all of whom the Georgians confusingly (and deliberately) tend to employ their own ethnonym (thus is the 'Georgian' population of Georgia increased!). Almost all of the Kartvelians resident in Abkhazia were Mingrelian, and by no means did all 240,000 of them flee into Georgia proper after the Abkhazian victory at the end of September 1993 (as asserted in Footnote 2 to Table 2 on page 14), making a mockery of Georgian/UN/UNHCR claims to have upto 300,000 'Georgian' refugees from Abkhazia on their soil.

In 1989 it was not that «the Georgian government strengthened the role of the Georgian language in public affairs, in schools and universities, which was

treated as a provocation by the republic's minorities, many of whom speak poor Georgian» (p.35). What the Georgian government did, by promulgating in August 1989 the State Programme for the Georgian Language, whose draft had appeared in late 1988 was to make a test in Georgian language and literature essential for admission to higher education in the republic. This is what was regarded as a provocation. However, a university-problem did arise in Abkhazia in 1989, and it led to the bloodshed in Sukhum and Ochamchira on 15/16th July that year. Despite the fact that the Abkhaz State University had always had three sectors, the largest of which was the Georgian-language sector, since the university served the needs of the whole of Western Georgia, students and staff in this sector were encouraged by the nationalists (like the late Merab K'ost'ava, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the late Gia Ch'ant'uria) coming to prominence in Tbilisi to agitate against the Abkhazians by alleging discrimination against Georgian and thereby give these nationalists the excuse to campaign about discrimination of Georgian(s) in Abkhazia. This is what happened, and, when a branch of Tbilisi University was (quite illegally) opened in Sukhum that summer, the reaction was just what the nationalists had desired and gave them the opportunity to effect their fully planned (see Popkov 1989) ethnic clashes in mid July. I assume the language- and university-issues have been conflated in the authors' description quoted above.

It is regrettable that the authors felt it necessary in Footnote 98 to draw readers' attention to the 1993 book *Abkazijska-1992: Postkomunističeskaja Šovinejska* by Svetlana Chervonnaja (available in English translation under the title *Conflict in the Caucasus*, Gothic Press, 1994). This is little more than blatant Georgian propaganda masquerading as an objective assessment by virtue of having a non-Kartvelian author(ess). For a brief review see Clogg (1995).

None of the emendations I have introduced seriously detracts from the value of this pamphlet. It is just a pity that the authors did not take the time (a week at most) to have a Caucasologist glance over their manuscript before it was submitted to the printers, a not uncommon failing of non-Caucasologists tackling Caucasian themes.

Typographical Slips:

pp.14 & 20: Noxčijn...Ičkeriy; p.16 l1up: as anywhere; p.17 l23: explanations; in Table 4 on p.17 Dargwa, an alternative to Dargin, as used elsewhere, which forms a sub-group of the Daghestanian language-family with Lak, has unfortunately slipped into the column presenting Turkic languages; p.20 l26up:



Chechen; p.23 l.13up: Iriston; p.36 l.14up: Abkhazia's; l.6up: Footnote 100; p.37 l.17up: arguments towards; p.41 Ft.7: *Ming*; Ft.16: January 1920; p.42 Ft.33: discussions.

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