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3. In Defence of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict¹

The origin of the people inhabiting the eastern coast of the Black Sea has always exercised a strong fascination for historians. For Herodotus, known as the 'Father of History', the Colchian population of this region was related to the Egyptians: 'There can be no doubt that the Colchians are an Egyptian race. Before I heard any mention of the fact from others, I had remarked it myself. After the thought had struck me, I made inquiries on the subject both in Colchis and in Egypt, and I found that the Colchians had a more distinct recollection of the Egyptians than the Egyptians had of them. Still, the Egyptians said that they believed the Colchians to be descended from the army of Sesostris'.² Herodotus, who wrote his *Histories* in the fifth century BC, based his findings on linguistic affinities and on some common cultural practices, such as circumcision and weaving techniques. Other Greek and some Roman scholars, on the contrary, asserted that the inhabitants of this region came from the Pyrenees in present-day Spain. Georgian authors in the middle ages had a more religious interest in the question and traced the origin of its people to the bible. Kartlos, a descendant of Noah, was said to be the 'Urvater' of the Georgian people.³

The French historian César Famin, who published a contribution on the Caucasus in an encyclopaedia of geography in 1824, passed critical judgement on all previous attempts to retrace the ethnic origin of the various peoples of the Caucasus. Ancient authors had gathered precious knowledge on these peoples but had failed to decipher the noble past of the region, as they lacked the modern critical methods of historiography and geography: 'In the steppes of the Caucasus one could more easily find the grains of primitive sand that were successively deposited there by the desert winds than one could disentangle the genealogical chaos of the ancient inhabitants of the Caucasian region. Herodotus, Thucydides, Diodorus, Pliny and Strabo undoubtedly provide most precious information in this regard; but, at the time when these venerable historians were writing, they lacked all the resources that, a number of centuries later, the development of human knowledge has placed at the disposal of geographers and historians'.⁴

Historians from Greece, Rome and Byzantium had made the mistake of giving the same name to different peoples who had consecutively inhabited the region, and of giving different names to one and the same people. Critical historiography has had to re-examine the truthfulness of narratives such as those of the ancient Greek authors. The establishment of colonies gave the Greeks an opportunity to gather substantial knowledge about the peoples inhabiting the Caucasus, but their poetical genius (*'génie poétique'*) covered the historical facts with a veil of mythical knowledge. The difficulty of retracing the origins of the various nationalities of the Caucasus – Famin counted no fewer than twenty in his own time⁵ – was also caused by objective factors. There were hundreds of different tribes in antiquity to whom it would be difficult to ascribe clear territorial boundaries. Moreover, successive foreign invasions disrupted domestic economic and political processes. Critical historiography was therefore confronted with an extremely difficult task in trying to unscramble what had really happened in this region.⁶ Famin's contrasting of modern critical analysis with ancient poetical and religious imagination, in retracing the origins of the nations of the Caucasus, reflected the values of a scholar from the first half of the nineteenth century. Even though the question of the origin of the nations of the Caucasus was relevant before the modern age, in order to justify dynastic claims,⁷ it had never had a direct bearing on political mass mobilization. It carried a very different significance a century later, under the Soviet regime, when it became part of a highly politicized discussion on the socialist transformation of the region.

The present chapter is devoted to the use of history – in particular, the methods of ethnogenesis – and other scientific disciplines as mobilizing tools in the conflict between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities. In the wake of de-stalinization in the 1950s, the discussion of ancestral rights on the territory of Abkhazia became one of the main issues in the conflict between the two national communities. It was closely linked to the repeated attempts by the Abkhazian national movement to secede from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. The political and institutional settings in which scientific debates took place in the Soviet period and their transformation as a result of the war is a further topic of interest for the comparative analysis attempted in this volume. This chapter describes the kind of arguments and scientific disciplines to be found in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict over the political status of Abkhazia, and the way in which scholars in both national communities have reflected on questions such as the moral responsibility of the intelligentsia in the mass mobilizations leading to the war, and criteria for truthfulness in scientific debates.

The following chapter is divided into three parts. The first focuses on the history of the conflict up to the 1992-93 war. The issues mentioned above – the institutional setting in which scientific debates took place, the use of scientific arguments and disciplines and the critical self-reflection of intellectuals – will all

be addressed in this part, but the various explanatory factors at work in this intellectual conflict will be analysed in chronological order as interrelated elements. The second part deepens this understanding through a separate analysis of the individual factors. The third part briefly depicts the changes that have taken place in the intellectual communities in Georgia and Abkhazia since the war, and assesses the ways in which intellectuals have reflected on the role they played in the pre-war period.

The History of the Conflict

The 1930s were fateful years for the Soviet Union.⁸ Stalinist terror was directed against possible dissent in Soviet society and in the Communist Party itself, regardless of the nationality of its members,⁹ and against any form of thought that might somehow be branded as nationalism. The policies of repression went hand in hand with a reform of the ethno-federal Soviet institutions. In 1936, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic was split up into Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. These three states became Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs). The so-called 'titular nations' of these states (the Armenians, Azeris and Georgians, respectively, who gave their names to the republics) had the right to self-determination, up to and including the right of secession. The 1936 constitution declared Union republics to be sovereign states with the right to secede. Such rights remained highly formal as long as the Communist Party retained its leadership of the overall state and exercised centralized control of all its subordinated units, but it had more than symbolic significance for the nationalities concerned. This is particularly true of some of the nationalities that received only a lower status. The Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia (Abkhazian ASSR) was not granted sovereignty or the right to secede, nor did it have the right to demand an upgrading of its political status, which would have implied secession from Georgia. According to the Soviet constitution, the territory of the Union republics could not be changed without their consent.¹⁰ So, as part of the Georgian Union Republic, Abkhazia became dependent both on the communist leadership in Moscow and on the authorities in Tbilisi.

The Stalinist terror acquired a specific meaning in Georgia and Abkhazia. Nestor Lakoba, the communist leader of Abkhazia, was poisoned in December 1936 by Lavrenti Beria, Head of the Georgian Communist Party¹¹ and Stalin's most powerful lieutenant in the region. The fact that Beria was a Mingrelian, originating from the village of Merkheuli, which is located not far from Abkhazia's capital Sukhum(i),¹² gave a particular significance to the policies he implemented in the name of the Soviet state.¹³ Age-old conflicts between the Abkhazian ethnic community and the Mingrelians – a sub-ethnic Georgian

community with its own language and culture – had been overlaid but not suppressed by the Soviet regime.¹⁴ From the Abkhazian perspective, Beria's actions were seen as part of the Georgian attempt to take full control of Abkhazia. Beria started a purge of Abkhazian officials and replaced them by putting Mingrelians in leading positions in the Abkhazian ASSR. A campaign was launched with the apparent aim of suppressing Abkhazian culture as a separate entity. The fact that the Abkhazian population was small (as a result of forced emigration to the Ottoman Empire, under the tsarist regime in the nineteenth century) could explain why Stalin's regime had ready to hand an alternative to their deportation to Central Asia, which had been the fate of other peoples of the Caucasus, like the Chechens and the Ingush. The small size of the Abkhazian population (56,000 out of a total population of 311,000 for the whole of Abkhazia)¹⁵ would indeed have facilitated its total assimilation over a few generations. After 1937, Abkhazian publications were to be published only in Georgian script – a ruling which was not suppressed until 1954, after the death of Stalin.¹⁶ Abkhazian schools were closed from 1944 to 1953.¹⁷ In the same period, the Tbilisi government launched a programme to colonize the Abkhazian region. The immigration waves of Georgian, Russian and Armenian workers changed the demographic situation dramatically. Georgian immigration was not very significant from 1926 to 1939, but it rose sharply between 1939 and 1959.¹⁸ During this latter period the Georgian – and especially Mingrelian – population of Abkhazia increased by 66,000, compared with 5,000 for the Abkhazian population.

These events exacerbated the already deep antagonism that existed between the two communities. The political motives behind the decision to bring in a massive new workforce to Abkhazia cannot easily be dissociated from the economic ones, and indeed both kinds of motives were strongly interlinked in the Soviet type of planned economy. Moreover, migration movements are a normal consequence of the modernization of traditional societies and of economic development. But the Abkhazian community had good reason to believe that the influx of Georgian settlers was due not only to economic causes but also to the determination of Tbilisi to establish more direct control over their country. This perception was reinforced by historical memories of the Russian programmes of forced migration and colonization in the Caucasus region. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia had achieved the political pacification of this restive region at the cost of the forced migration to the Ottoman Empire of a large section of the population of Abkhazia and other parts of the Caucasus.¹⁹ Whereas a multi-national population has been a traditional feature of the Caucasus, co-habitation with Georgians subsequently became resented by the Abkhazian population as a threat. They feared that their neighbours might end up stripping them first of their status as a titular nation and then of their territory. From

this perspective, the Abkhazian élites perceived any academic debate about the ancient history of this territory or the origin of its inhabitants or their languages as a dangerous terrain affecting the survival of their community. Under Stalin or Khrushchev, it was not possible to voice this perception of a deep danger publicly, or to translate it into a political programme, but it gradually gave rise to a coherent intellectual and political discourse.

In 1954, the literary historian Pavle Ingoroqva²⁰ published a book on the origins of the people inhabiting Abkhazia in which he denied that the Abkhazian community was indigenous to the region. In his view, they had migrated from the Northern Caucasus to Abkhazia in the seventeenth century, taking over the ethnonym of the 'real' Abkhazians, while these 'real' Abkhazians, as depicted in ancient sources, were in fact Georgians. This thesis was based on his interpretation of historical documents and his linguistic analysis of geographical terms. Ingoroqva's interpretation was adopted by other scholars in Georgia, leading in August 1956 to loud protests from the Abkhazian side, including from the president of the Abkhazian Council of Ministers and other Abkhazian communist officials. This espousal by Georgian academics of the thesis of the non-indigenous character of the Abkhazians came at a time when Stalin's deportation of numerous national minorities was still fresh in all memories. The Abkhazians had good reason to believe that such actions might one day be repeated. Ingoroqva's thesis not only lent legitimacy to the Georgian policy of colonization of Abkhazia, but might have provided some kind of justification for the forced removal of the Abkhazians from their lands.²¹

The publication of Ingoroqva's book could indeed be interpreted as a sign that the Georgian authorities were ready to challenge the rights and privileges of the Abkhazian titular nation on its territory. There was no academic freedom or freedom of publication in Soviet Georgia. Historical research was a highly political activity, strictly controlled by the Georgian authorities, who would not tolerate any kind of publication that questioned its policies or endangered the ideological dominance of the Communist Party. According to Soviet practice, publications fostering inter-ethnic conflicts were forbidden. The refusal to censure Ingoroqva's book was therefore a political act.

The Abkhazian idea of a nation was based on the belief that the links between a community, its ethnic origin and its ancestral land were sacred. Ingoroqva's thesis was perceived as an insult to the nation. Soon after the Abkhazian protests against its popularization by Georgian scholars, the first appeals in support of secession were made to the Soviet authorities. In a letter addressed to the Moscow leadership in April 1957, a series of prominent Abkhazian signatories requested that the Abkhazian SSR should accede to the Russian Federation. This request was based on the presupposition that it was the exclusive right of the titular nation to determine the political status of its homeland. The request was

refused, but the Soviet authorities exerted serious pressure on the Georgian Communist Party to change its policies, and in June 1957 Tbilisi distanced itself from Ingoroqva's thesis.²²

The death of Stalin and de-stalinization improved the position of the Abkhazian community: measures were implemented to enhance the status of the Abkhazian and Russian languages, and a new teacher-training course in 'Abkhazian and Russian language and literature' was introduced in 1954 at the Sukhum(i) Pedagogical Institute.²³ In addition, the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party admitted, in August 1956, that it had followed erroneous policies towards the republic's numerous minorities. This included a divide-and-rule policy that had increased ethnic tensions, and an attempt to destroy the national culture of these minorities through repression or assimilation: 'In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the conflict between Georgians, Abkhazians, Armenians and Ossetians was artificially fomented and a policy leading to the liquidation of the national cultures of the local Abkhazian, Ossetian and Armenian peoples and their forced assimilation was deliberately pursued.'²⁴ This radical self-criticism did not, however, lead to more effective ways of integrating the Abkhazian community into the Georgian political framework. The fact that Ingoroqva's thesis was repudiated only in 1957 – one year after the self-criticism by the Georgian communist leadership – was a clear indication of the difficulty of achieving Georgian-Abkhazian reconciliation.

The view that the Abkhazian community was not indigenous to Abkhazia was not destined to disappear. Ten years after its publication by Ingoroqva, N. A. Berdzenishvili published a similar thesis, and the Tbilisi authorities likewise failed to condemn it. The review published in the Communist Party newspaper in March 1967 honoured his analysis as 'an important contribution to Georgian historical science'.²⁵ Abkhazian intellectuals and students protested against this publication and the lack of condemnation by the Georgian leadership. A new Abkhazian request for secession from the Georgian SSR and integration into the Russian Federation was sent to the Soviet authorities. At a meeting of the Bureau of the Georgian Central Committee in March 1967, the complaints by the Abkhazian delegates were discussed but did not meet with any approval. According to the statement issued on behalf of the Central Committee by its Secretary, Sturua, Berdzenishvili's work did not include 'anything insulting for the Abkhazians' and should not be used to legitimize any kind of trouble. Ingoroqva's thesis was not to be silenced. In 1978, the Abkhazian historians G. Dzidzaria and Z. Anchabadze presented a study to the Georgian Communist Party, claiming that no less than 32 publications, most of them scientific, included Ingoroqva's thesis in a modified form.²⁶

In January 1976, at the 25th Congress of the Georgian Communist Party, party leader Eduard Shevardnadze made an appeal for increased efforts to reduce

existing educational and cultural inequalities between the ethnic communities in the Georgian Republic. Substantial economic investments were promised for Abkhazia. Such policies addressing the material causes of ethnic conflicts were, however, far from sufficient to prevent secessionist strivings in Abkhazia. This approach was not adequate for addressing the problem of an increasingly nationalist mood in both Georgia and Abkhazia.

In Georgia, new conflicts emerged in 1977 during the discussions on education policies and a new Soviet constitution. There were fears in the Georgian Communist Party and among the Georgian intelligentsia that the development of bilingual education (Russian and Georgian) in Georgia itself would lead to a decay in knowledge of the Georgian mother tongue. The draft constitution put forward by the Soviet leadership envisaged abolishing the privileged status of Georgian as a 'state language' and giving equal standing to all the languages used in the Georgian Republic. This challenge to the privileges of the titular nation, which at the time constituted about 68 per cent of the population of the Union republic,²⁷ was perceived by the Georgian communist leadership and public as an attempt at the further Russification of their homeland. The Georgian Writers' Union played a prominent role in opposing this draft. After strong movements of protest, including demonstrations by several thousand people (the majority of them students and youth), the new constitutional regulation was cancelled in April 1978. Georgian remained the official state language of the republic.²⁸

In Abkhazia, in a letter in December 1977, 130 prominent intellectuals and party officials accused the Georgian authorities of continuing Beria's policies and of 'Georgianizing' their republic²⁹ – a letter which, by the same token, implied a criticism of the Abkhazian communist leadership for co-operating in the process of 'Georgianization'. They requested once more that Abkhazia should join Russia. In spring 1978 a number of demonstrations took place in Abkhazia. In May, 12,000 people assembled in the village of Lykhny, the traditional gathering-place where the Abkhazian community elders discussed public affairs, and there they signed an appeal for secession. Troubled by these disturbances and the waning legitimacy of the local communist leaders, the Moscow leadership decided to intervene. The local party leader was dismissed, and the Soviet authorities rejected the secessionist request to include Abkhazia in the Russian Federation. They also opposed the suppression of Georgian as an official language in Abkhazia. Moscow considered, however, that some of the other Abkhazian claims were legitimate. It was convinced that much could be achieved by working on material conditions in the autonomous republic, such as improving the local infrastructure or creating new industries. Even more than in the past, leading positions were to be allocated to ethnic Abkhazians. The concessions also included greater institutional autonomy in the fields of science, education and the media. After the protest meetings of 1978, Sukhum(i) got its own university – the Peda-

gological Institute was transformed into the Abkhazian State University, designed to serve the needs of the whole of western Georgia. It had an Abkhazian, a Georgian and a Russian section. The Abkhazian Republic also got its own television station, which every week broadcast a few hours of (mainly news) programmes in the Abkhazian language.³⁰

The Georgian communist leadership then tried to avoid further conflicts by making the Abkhazian question taboo.³¹ Complaints raised in either community about the privileges granted to the other could not be discussed either within the party or in the media. It was argued that such discussions would only fan the flames of existing conflicts. Forbidding public discussion of the Abkhazian question, however, did not prevent it. Fears of Russification, which had come to the fore during the discussions on the new Soviet constitution, were voiced by Georgian intellectuals in discussing the future of Abkhazia. The strong, even dominant, position of the Russian language – it was used as a *lingua franca* between Abkhazia's various communities – was perceived as a threat to Georgian culture. In this way, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict became part of the increasingly tense Russo-Georgian relations. The fact that Georgian-Abkhazian relations could not be discussed openly left dissident literature as one of the few outlets for fears and complaints. From the beginning of the 1980s, Georgian *samizdat* literature protested against the living conditions of the Georgian population residing in Abkhazia.

From the perspective of the Georgian national movement, the Soviet form of economic modernization was directly responsible for the creation of a multicultural society in Georgia, challenging the leading position of the ethnic Georgians as its titular nation. The Soviet plans in the second half of the 1980s to create a new Transcaucasian Railway, linking Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz (known as Orjonikidze until 1990) in the Russian Federation, were opposed because of their consequences for the ecological balance in northern Georgia. Cultural monuments would moreover have to be sacrificed. Some nationalists also saw this railway as an incentive to further immigration into Georgia by a foreign workforce.³² A declaration, dated 3 June 1987 and signed by 800 writers, artists and scientists (among them Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia), and addressed to Secretary-General Gorbachev, considered this project to be a breach of Georgia's sovereignty. The letter included some statements on the status of the minorities. The signatories declared that the right of a people to a particular territory was a sacred right which, in principle, could not be shared. They compared a country to a home where there is only one landlord and all the other inhabitants are guests. The fact that the ethnically Georgian part of the population had fallen below 70 per cent was seen as a consequence of the creation of autonomous entities by the Russian authorities. The majority of the Georgian public and political élite did not question the autochthonous status of the Abk-

hazians on their territory.³³ But a strong trend in the Georgian nationalist movement supported the idea that political autonomy for Abkhazia and its status as a privileged titular nation could quite well be replaced by cultural autonomy.³⁴

Since 1957, protest movements whose demands included secession had erupted in the Abkhazian Republic every ten years.³⁵ In 1957, 1967 and 1977 these movements were closely linked to academic polemics. The fourth wave of protest movements came in the wake of the democratization of Soviet state structures. Political reforms made new kinds of political mobilization possible and brought to the fore the question of redistributing power among élites and national groups. Previously, key posts in Abkhazia had been distributed according to a complicated system based on ethnic criteria. Certain posts could only be held by ethnic Georgians, while for others only ethnic Abkhazians or Russians were eligible. This distribution of power had given a certain stability to the political system, but its lack of transparency and democratic legitimacy had also exacerbated the tensions between the ethnic communities.

In the so-called 'Abkhazian Letter', written in June 1988 at the initiative of the Writers' Union of Abkhazia and addressed to the Soviet Communist Party, 60 well-known personalities from the Abkhaz community – all members of the Communist Party, including even some high-ranking officials – once more demanded the secession of Abkhazia from the Georgian SSR.³⁶ They wanted the re-establishment of Abkhazia's Union republic status, which had been granted after the establishment of the Soviet regime. The letter stated that in 1931 Abkhazia's status had been unjustly downgraded to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia. In the authors' view, the Tbilisi authorities had followed colonialist policies in relation to Abkhazia, before and after the establishment of a Soviet regime in the region in 1921. In this respect, there was no basic difference between the policies of the Menshevik government, which had ruled Georgia in the period 1918-21, and those of the Georgian government after the take-over by the communists. They were both regarded as expressions of Georgian colonialism. The letter did not envisage any possibility of overcoming the conflict with Georgia, and put forward secession as a last resort. In March 1989, about 30,000 people gathered in Lykhny. Representatives of national minorities in Abkhazia, such as the Greek, Armenian and Russian communities, took part in this mobilization. Their appeal, addressed to party leader Mikhail Gorbachev, was a rewording of previous demands.

The capacity to mobilize popular support was not confined to the Abkhazian leadership – the Georgian national movement too was receiving increased public support – and intellectuals and scholars played a prominent role in these mobilizations. The involvement of the intelligentsia in the public dispute had taken a new turn thanks to an escalating 'media war' between the two communities. Series of articles denigrating each other's point of view were published in the

Georgian and Abkhazian press. The polemics were addressed to a domestic audience as part of a mobilization campaign in each community, and the historical arguments making scientific claims were popularized by journalists or by scholars themselves. The origins of the present population of Abkhazia and Georgian-Abkhazian relations in the period 1918-21 were the most prominent historical themes. In the Georgian media, Ingoroqva's ideas were fully rehabilitated, including by Gamsakhurdia himself.³⁷ Georgians' conviction that the conflict with the Abkhazian community was primarily the result of manipulation by Russia was supported by historians, who stated that political autonomy had been granted to both Abkhazian and Ossetian revolutionaries as a reward for their support to the Bolsheviks in the annexation of Georgia.³⁸

In 1989, the Georgian national movement was focused on the conflict with the leadership of the South Ossetian autonomous region,³⁹ but meanwhile the conflict between Tbilisi and the Abkhazian officials in Sukhum(i) continued to escalate. On 14 May 1989, the Georgian Council of Ministers decided to form a branch of Tbilisi State University in Sukhum(i) by splitting up the existing multilingual Abkhazian university. This problem then became one of the main sources of discord between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities in Abkhazia itself. The Abkhazian national movement linked the question of a united Abkhazian university to the survival of Abkhazian culture, declaring that its rights as a nation were being 'strangled on its own soil'.⁴⁰ The attempt to divide the university structures led to violent clashes, first in Sukhum(i) on 15 July 1989 and, the day after, in Ochamchira.

The population gathered weapons. The Georgian authorities feared that Moscow would make use of the spread of violence to declare a state of emergency in the Abkhazian Republic and that authority over Abkhazia would consequently be withdrawn from Tbilisi. According to this scenario, local conflicts and riots would pave the way for future secession by Abkhazia. This fear did not lead to steps favouring de-escalation. A 'State Programme for the Georgian Language', stipulating the compulsory teaching of Georgian in all the republic's schools, became law in August 1989. Passing a test in Georgian language and literature would now be an essential qualification for admission to higher education throughout the republic. The consequences of such a ruling for minorities like the Abkhazians, amongst whom knowledge of Georgian was virtually non-existent,⁴¹ cannot be overstated. It revived the memory of Stalinist repression.⁴²

Among the intelligentsia of the Georgian and Abkhazian communities, however, there was no consensus on the slogans used by their leaderships. In 1990, the two most famous intellectuals of Georgia and Abkhazia opposed the choices made by their people. The Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili, who up to his death in 1990 enjoyed a high reputation in the Soviet Union as an independent scholar, openly criticized the nationalist mobilization of the Georgian

population. Fazil Iskander, an Abkhazian novelist, whose books (written in Russian) were extremely popular in the Soviet Union, could be heard as a voice of moderation in the escalating conflict. In his literary writings, he had described the prejudices of the Abkhazians towards their Mingrelian neighbours with a certain amount of irony.⁴³ In 1990, he distanced himself from the Lykhny Appeal and from secessionist strivings. He warned that Abkhazia could be turned into a new Nagorno-Karabakh. He was not taken seriously by either side in the conflict. He was criticized, for instance, by the Georgian historian Giorgi Paichadze because in his appeal he had mentioned the previous oppression of Abkhazians by the Georgian authorities. In Paichadze's view, such oppression had never existed.⁴⁴

The events leading up to the war of 1992-93 were to follow one another at high speed.⁴⁵ In March 1990, Georgia declared its sovereignty. It declined to participate in the referendum of 17 March 1991 on the renewal of the Soviet federal framework as proposed by Gorbachev. The non-Georgian population of Abkhazia, however, did take part in this referendum, and voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of preserving the Union. Yet two weeks later it took no part in the referendum on Georgia's independence, which was supported by a huge majority of the population of Georgia. Independence was declared in April 1991, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president the following month, with over 86 per cent of the vote. In Abkhazia, the conflicts between the two main national communities made it impossible to agree on the functioning or legitimacy of a common institutional framework. The Abkhazian parliament became paralysed by the formation of two blocks.

In Tbilisi, political support for Zviad Gamsakhurdia waned, and he was ousted in the winter of 1991-92 by a *coup d'état* mounted by his former supporters among paramilitary groupings. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former leader of the Georgian Communist Party and Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs, returned to his country in March 1992. He managed to ensure respect for a ceasefire in South Ossetia, but did not support a de-escalation of political tensions in Abkhazia. In July of the same year, the Abkhazian parliament – in the absence of the Georgian deputies, who were boycotting its proceedings – re-instated the constitution that had been adopted by the All-Abkhazian Congress of Soviets in 1925, and which provided for treaty ties with Georgia and the right to secession.⁴⁶ The Abkhazian deputies argued that this step was a response to a unilateral action taken by the Georgian parliament to rescind all constitutional acts of the Soviet period and to re-establish the Georgian constitution of 1921, which included only a vague clause on Abkhazian autonomy.

On 14 August 1992, the Georgian National Guard – a Georgian paramilitary organization, whose leader Tengiz Kitovani was a member of the Georgian State Council (which was presided over by Shevardnadze) – entered Abkhazia and

occupied its capital Sukhum(i). Russian-mediated ceasefires did not hold. Shevardnadze's appeals for Western support received no response. Support from volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and Russian military assistance, made it possible for the Abkhazian forces to repulse the Georgian troops from Abkhazia, and the Georgian defeat was sealed in October 1993.

The UN report on the Secretary-General's fact-finding mission in October 1993 to investigate human-rights violations in Abkhazia stated that atrocities and human-rights violations had been committed by both sides in the conflict. According to this report, most Georgians living in the region between the Gumista and Inguri Rivers had tried to flee before the arrival of the Abkhazian forces. Their motive was fear, and this fear was actively fuelled by the Abkhazian side. According to the UN report, those who stayed behind were said to have been either killed outright or warned by the first Abkhazian units entering southern Abkhazia that other troops engaged in looting, burning and killing were on their way. The report also listed serious war crimes committed by the Georgian side during the conflict.⁴⁷

Despite the ending of the war, by the start of the new millennium only a little progress had been made towards reaching an agreement. A United Nations Military Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was sent to monitor the ceasefire. Russian (formally CIS) troops were deployed along the conflict line and Russia was called on to act as a facilitator in the conflict. Negotiations took place under UN auspices but by the end of 2001 had failed to lead to any agreement on political status or the return of refugees. Abkhazia adopted a new constitution in 1994, declaring itself sovereign. Under Georgian pressure, Russia imposed a blockade of Abkhazia. Georgia adopted its new constitution in 1995. The federalization of the country was postponed pending a peace settlement for the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts. In the Georgian-Abkhazian negotiations concerning a so-called 'common state', the Abkhazian authorities proposed a confederal arrangement, whereby the equality and sovereign status of both entities would be respected. This was regarded as unacceptable by the Georgian authorities, who claimed that a confederation would act as a stepping-stone to full independence for Abkhazia. In their view, Abkhazia should retain the status of a federated unit within the Georgian state. These opposing views led to a deadlock in the negotiations. In the meantime, large numbers of Georgian refugees returned to their homes in the Gali region – without, however, receiving sufficient guarantees for their security. Confidence-building measures likewise failed to lead to results that were considered satisfactory by either side in the conflict. In 1999, Abkhazia declared its independence. This has not been recognized by the international community.

Factors at Work

The Privileges of a Titular Nation

Several factors have to be taken into account in an analysis of the widening cleavage between the two ethnic communities.⁴⁸ The first is the strengthening of the privileged position of the titular nations of Union and autonomous republics, and of their leaderships. This was typical of the entire Soviet Union but, according to Grey Hodnett, the over-representation of the titular nation in the state structures of the Georgian Republic was exceptionally high by any Soviet standards. In the period 1955-72, 97.2 per cent of all nomenklatura positions were occupied by Georgian nationals.⁴⁹ Georgians were greatly over-represented in the regional administration, economic management, party leadership, ministerial offices and civil service of the Union republic. This was also reflected in education.⁵⁰ The indigenous intelligentsia was able to consolidate its position through preferential access to higher education, and through the establishment of a hegemonic position in cultural activities.⁵¹ In 1985, 91 per cent of book production and 83 per cent of newspapers were in Georgian. Two television stations and 11 radio stations broadcast Georgian programmes. The language barrier effectively excluded the minorities from the State University of Tbilisi. In 1987, the conservative Politburo member Ligachev complained that 98 per cent of the students at this top university were of Georgian nationality.⁵²

This particular form of self-government, which was accompanied by a number of phenomena such as corruption, nepotism and a shadow economy at the various levels of the Soviet hierarchical framework, led to heightened tension between the Georgian and Abkhazian national nomenklaturas. The distribution of power between the leadership of the Union and that of the autonomous republic, and between the leaderships of the two main nationalities in Abkhazia itself, was in fact linked to the distribution of political privileges and material wealth. Abkhazia managed to extract concessions from Moscow and Tbilisi in order to enforce its position in cultural and educational policies. These concessions provoked strong feelings of resentment among the Georgian community of Abkhazia. This population, which constituted a relative majority of 39 per cent of the total population of Abkhazia in 1959 and 45 per cent in 1989, felt itself to be a victim of discrimination, which increased the tension between the two communities and between the two republics.

Most national minorities in Georgia did not actively oppose the privileged status of its titular nation. Members of the minorities played an active part in Georgia's rich intellectual and artistic life, without, however, engaging themselves in the construction of a separate identity for their national community. According to Mark Saroyan, the cultural and political practices of these minori-

ties 'reflect an operational code that largely precludes the construction of minority national culture outside the home republic'. Armenian writers active in Georgia, for instance, did not use the genre of the historical novel, which has served as an indispensable vehicle of ethnic history in Armenia itself.⁵³ Things were different, however, for intellectuals from minorities which, like the Ossetes and the Abkhazians, themselves enjoyed the status of a titular nation. The Abkhazian University, for example, was one of the most important projects in the Soviet authorities' attempt to pacify the restive region. Together with the Institute for Language, Literature and History, it was the most important institution of the Abkhazian intelligentsia, while Georgians condemned it as an instrument of Russification, since many of its courses were given in Russian.⁵⁴

It is interesting to note that many Georgian scholars criticized the privileged status of the Abkhazian nationality, without reflecting on the hegemonic role of their own community in the Georgian Union Republic. In a book published during the war, the Georgian historian Mariam Lordkipanidze perceived the privileges accorded to the titular nation of Abkhazia as unjust. She accused her Abkhazian ('Apsua')⁵⁵ colleagues of defending the thesis – which directly mirrors that of Ingoroqva – that only the Abkhazians were indigenous to the region: 'More newspapers and magazines were published for the Apsua population (17 %) than for the Georgian population (47 %). The Apsua had their own theatre and their own branch of the Writers' Union; they published books and had their own radio and television centre (broadcasting largely in Abkhaz and Russian), and they had the Abkhaz Research Institute for Language, Literature and History (a branch of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR), whose scholars were almost exclusively of Apsua nationality and where research involved only Abkhaz themes. For decades, Abkhaz and Russian historians wrote a "history" of Abkhazia that distorted reality. The basic aim of these "historical writings" was to present Abkhazia as the primordial country of the Apsua while the Georgians were conquerors who had deprived them of their land, language, writing and culture.'⁵⁶

Despite the apparent symmetry in the privileged position of the titular nationality in state structures and in scientific and educational institutions, the Abkhazian community was in an inferior position not only where access to political and economic decision-making at the all-Union level was concerned, but also with regard to the Soviet scientific and educational system. This reflected the relations of subordination between Union republics and autonomous republics and the privileged status, in both political units, of their titular nation. It was not possible, for instance, to defend a candidate or a doctoral dissertation⁵⁷ in Abkhazia itself. Scholars from the region could receive a doctoral degree only in Moscow, which meant going through a difficult process of selection on the basis of qualifications and other criteria, or in Tbilisi, which meant adapting

to the standards set by Georgian scholars. For this reason, close links with research institutions and publishing houses in Moscow became an issue of strategic importance for Abkhazian scholars.⁵⁸

Both Georgians and Abkhazians found support in the positions of the liberal reformers in Moscow. In Moscow in the late 1980s, one of the main issues in the academic and political debate on the future of Soviet federalism was the type of relations to be established between the various units within the Soviet framework. Some scholars, such as the late Galina Starovoitova, an ethnographer and member of the Congress of People's Deputies, advocated giving equal standing to all titular nations. She favoured a kind of confederal arrangement, which would reject the formal hierarchical division of major ethnic groups. Authority would then be delegated from the bottom up, with each subject of the federation determining, by itself, the degree of sovereignty it wished to delegate to the Soviet centre. The reformed Union should even allow the emergence of new political entities for national communities demanding statehood.⁵⁹ The deputies of the democratic Inter-Regional Group, to whom the nuclear scientist and human-rights activist Andrei Sakharov belonged, were influenced by these views, which also came close to the Abkhazian position on the issue. Other political reformers, however, feared that this approach would weaken the rights of the existing Union republics and play into the hands of the conservatives at the centre.⁶⁰ This was also the view defended by Tbilisi.

In the opinion of Georgian critics, the Abkhazian D. Gulia Institute of Language, Literature and History became the spearhead for Abkhazian separatism, especially after Vladislav Ardzinba's appointment as director in 1988. A large majority of its researchers were ethnic Abkhazians. Ardzinba himself was a specialist in the Hittites and the history of the ancient Near East. He became a People's Deputy to the USSR Supreme Soviet and, a year later, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia.⁶¹ The great importance of scientific institutions as a mobilizing force and a marker for national identity has been perfectly understood by all sides in the conflict. In October 1992, the National State Archive of Abkhazia and the Abkhazian D. Gulia Research Institute of Language, Literature and History were burnt down by Georgian troops.⁶²

The Politicization of History and the Social Sciences

The high degree of politicization of history and the social sciences in Georgia and Abkhazia is a second factor to be taken into account in analysing the intellectual conflict between the two communities. This politicization gradually took on more radical nationalist traits. It is linked to the types of political discourse on nation-building to be found in Georgia and Abkhazia, both of which stress the importance of objective national characteristics in national identity-building.

Such characteristics include tangible facts, such as language or the presence on a particular territory 'from time immemorial'.⁶³ As explained by Oliver Reisner, 'because national identity is not conceived of as the subjective identification of individuals but rather as an objectively binding definition of belonging, this means that those groups which ultimately succeed in implanting their definition of national identity will also determine the interests of the national state'.⁶⁴ Both communities share the subjective sense of having Abkhazia as a homeland or – from the Georgian perspective – as an inalienable part of their homeland.⁶⁵ The denial by some Georgian scholars of the indigenous character of the Abkhazian population implied exclusive claims to the Abkhazian territory. There was no agreement among Georgian historians on this particular thesis, but a far greater convergence existed concerning the view that Georgians had constituted the dominant group or cultural entity from time immemorial.⁶⁶ Exclusive claims to the Abkhazian territory were also put forward by those Abkhazian intellectuals who were striving for secession. They saw Abkhazian political and cultural history as either separate from Georgia, or opposed to it. Their subjective sense of homeland, supported by their interpretation of the objective evidence of historiography, in their view justified both exclusive privileges as a titular nation and their claim that they were entitled to secession as an expression of their right to self-determination.

The debate on the origins of the inhabitants of Abkhazia is a good illustration of the high degree of politicization of all scientific debates on territory and ethnicity in the Soviet Union. The linking of the territorial dimension of national identity to a hierarchical federal framework – within which the titular nation could claim exclusive privileges over a particular territory inhabited by a multi-ethnic population – dramatized all discussions on the historical nature of this territory. A view of Abkhazia stressing that there was a need to acknowledge properly the diverse origins of its population, the equal rights of all its inhabitants and the consequences of socio-economic development for migration processes, was *a priori* excluded from academic and political discussions.

Scientific debates on the history of Abkhazia have frequently had recourse to the method of ethnogenesis ('the formation of peoples'), which is particularly important in the context of an analysis of the relationship between scientific methodology and politics. Already in the nineteenth century, discussions on the rights to particular territories had paralleled the creation of modern nationalism in the Caucasus.

By the end of the 1930s, studies of ethnogenesis had become increasingly important in Soviet scholarship.⁶⁷ This intellectual interest was fuelled not only for academic purposes – it was dictated largely by political motives. In the 1930s, an important paradigm shift in Soviet views on historiography and linguistics had taken place, reflecting profound transformations in the political environ-

ment. After the 1917 revolution, the thesis of the historian Mikhail N. Pokrovski and the linguist Nikolai Y. Marr – that attention should mainly be devoted to the stages common to all Soviet nations – had dominated Soviet historiography, and had received protection from the highest authorities. In the 1930s, however, Pokrovski and Marr's views were challenged by research focusing on the individual histories of the various nations constituting the Soviet Union. This approach was more in line than the previous one with the new national policies of the communist leadership. The introduction of the new paradigm was facilitated by the purges and reorganization that decimated the defenders of the previous approach to history and archaeology. A strong national focus was also facilitated by the rehabilitation of Russian history – which had previously been identified by Pokrovski and his followers with the history of a colonial power – in 1934.

The methods of ethnogenesis were further favoured by the emergence of new intellectual élites in the various republics, which became particularly relevant after the death of Stalin in 1953. When Ingoroqva's thesis on the non-indigenous character of the Abkhazian people became widely discussed in 1954, a whole generation of Soviet scholars had already been educated in these particular notions and methods of ethnogenesis. The local élites then selected new research programmes in line with their own traditions, value systems and political objectives. The strengthening of the privileged position of the 'titular nations' in the various republics of the Soviet Union, after the death of Stalin, went hand in hand with a growing need to prove the convergence of their present dominant position in the state with the existence of an age-old homogeneous settlement of ancestors on the same territory, and their autochthonous development throughout history. This ethnocentric attitude is closely linked to the essentialist view of the nation present in many studies on ethnogenesis, whereby cultures are seen as resembling crystallized minerals: once they have been formed, their shape is fixed once and for all.⁶⁸ This approach determined the scientific programmes carried out and the relative importance of particular disciplines followed in the individual republics. In the late Soviet period, Georgia had one of the highest numbers of practitioners of archaeology in the world, for its population size.⁶⁹

The politicization of historical research on the basis of an ethnocentric attitude led to a situation where definitive answers were given to complicated scientific problems without any firm evidence.⁷⁰ There is, of course, great unevenness in the quality of ethnogenetic research on Abkhazia, but it is striking that terms such as 'undoubtedly', 'indisputably' and similar expressions are used far more commonly in this type of research than might be expected, taking into account the fact that the material sources used in the reconstruction of the ethnic map of the region allow room for different interpretations. This is particularly the case with history before our era. Many researchers in Georgia and Abkhazia seem to be no less confident in the validity of their interpretations than Herodotus when

he asserted 'There can be no doubt that the Colchians are an Egyptian race'. Certainty is claimed in the interpretations concerning the proto-Abkhazian or proto-Georgian character of the ancient population on the territory of present-day Abkhazia, or concerning the reconstruction of a historical continuity in the ethnic composition of the population in the region, as if the archaeological material or classical texts spoke for themselves.⁷¹ The high political value attached to such interpretations, and the lack of academic freedom in discussing research results, made it difficult to achieve much methodological progress in critical historiography.⁷²

An even clearer sign of the high politicization of the humanities in Georgia and Abkhazia is the direct involvement of intellectuals in the political conflict between the two communities. The number of historical themes and scientific disciplines involved in the justification of Georgia's and Abkhazia's right to national self-determination increased significantly in the 1980s, and it was often difficult to distinguish the boundaries between scholarship and political propaganda. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a senior researcher at the Institute for Literature at the Georgian Academy of Sciences⁷³ and internationally the best-known leader of the dissident movement, was active in discussing language myths. He defended the thesis that the Georgian language had been humiliated and thrust into obscurity throughout history, but predicted its resurrection and elevation to spiritual leadership. He was at home in the worlds of both professional research and political dissent. Gamsakhurdia was able to make use of research done by philologists and medievalists who wrote in specialized publications – focusing, for example, on the interpretation of ancient Georgian manuscripts in their historical context – in order to defend political theses in which the unique character of the Georgian language and culture took a prominent place.⁷⁴

After his appointment as director of the Abkhazian Institute of Language, Literature and History, the Abkhazian scholar Vladislav Ardzinba likewise belonged to the worlds of both politics and scientific research. The Georgian historian Teimuraz Mikeladze had argued that iron had been first invented by the Chalybs, who were regarded as the 'ancestors' of the Georgians. They had introduced the Iron Age, he claimed, thereby making a massive contribution to human culture. Ardzinba argued that iron was in fact discovered by the ancestors of the Abkhazian-Adyghe peoples who lived, in the second millennium BC, precisely where Mikeladze located the Chalybs.⁷⁵ The political significance of this thesis cannot be overestimated.

A differentiation should be made, however, between the scholars who were also active as public intellectuals and those who did not share such political interests. In Georgia, language myths were most energetically defended by artists, journalists and teachers, whereas – with significant exceptions – professional linguists were more reluctant to defend such views, especially when they had no

political interests. These language myths were both 'extrinsic myths' focusing on the origin and destiny of the Georgian language and 'intrinsic myths' focusing on features such as elegance, purity and lexical resources which gave Georgian a superiority over other languages.⁷⁶ An indication of the degree of professionalization of this discipline is the extent to which Georgian linguists were reluctant to defend such myths. In this context, Graham Smith and his co-authors draw a comparison with Western Europe, where language myths belonged to linguistic orthodoxy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before being stigmatized by scholars as the products of amateurs and eccentrics.⁷⁷

The absence of open political discussions between the two communities on issues related to nation-building and secession may help to explain the type of scientific polemics on these issues. Both communities had been building up separate institutions, which were unable to enter into an open and critical dialogue with one another. The lack of objectivity in academic discussions touching on Georgian-Abkhazian relations has to be situated in this context. Objectivity is not necessarily to be seen only as a property of understanding, but can also be analysed as a property of the understander. Objectivity may be characterized, with Theodore R. Schatzki, as a set of character traits such as a willingness to revise judgments when they appear to be illegitimate, openness enough to learn from others and the capacity to dialogue in an even-handed and sincere manner with the people one studies.⁷⁸ Put into the Soviet context of Georgian-Abkhazian relations, objectivity as a kind of scholarly behaviour would have favoured the use of a set of inter-subjectively acceptable criteria in all debates on Abkhazia and its history. For all the reasons mentioned above, such a form of objectivity had been made impossible in Soviet times.⁷⁹

Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past

The incapacity of post-Stalinist leaders to assess the tragic consequences of the campaigns of terror and repression of the 1930s and 1940s for inter-ethnic relations in Georgia and Abkhazia is a further aspect of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. From the perspective of the Georgian leadership, there were no objective historical reasons to assume any responsibility for Stalin's or Beria's actions. In its view, the repression of the Georgian political élite had been no less severe than that of the Abkhazian one. The Georgian intelligentsia pointed out that Stalin and Beria had been acting primarily in their capacity as Soviet politicians, and not as Georgian nationalists, but it failed to assess how and to what extent their actions were embedded in a historical pattern of conflictual relations between the two communities. From the Abkhazian perspective, Georgian nationalistic motives were inherent in the methods used to repress their culture and population. Even though all Soviet nationalities had suffered from the Stal-

inist purges, the types of repressive regime and the motives of those implementing them had varied widely. In this respect, there was no radical distinction to be made, in their view, between the Soviet and the Georgian identities of political figures such as Stalin or Beria.

Orthodox and Unorthodox Nationalism

A fourth factor is constituted by the specific interaction between the authorities and the dissident movement of the 1970s. There was greater intellectual freedom in Georgia than in the rest of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸⁰ A further characteristic of intellectual life there was the fact that the 'orthodox' nationalism of the party leadership, which strove for a hegemony of Georgian national culture in the republic,⁸¹ and the 'unorthodox' nationalism⁸² of the *samizdat* movement, interacted in a way that led to a radicalization of both. The orthodox nationalism of the local party leadership ensured legitimacy in Georgian public opinion. But it also lent legitimacy to the struggle of the unorthodox nationalists for a new cultural and language policy. Indeed, it made it easier for the dissident movement to fight on this than on other issues, such as democracy or human rights. Compared with the Russian dissident movement, Georgian dissidents were less exercised about individual human rights and more concerned about the fate of the nation. As a further feature of this non-orthodox nationalism, Jürgen Gerber notes that none of the *samizdat* documents defended the language or cultural rights of non-Georgian minorities in Georgia. This shows that the Georgian dissidents shared the orthodox nationalists' aim of enforcing a hegemonic position for the Georgian language throughout the republic.⁸³ In fact they were even more radical in this respect, as they criticized the granting of concessions to minorities.⁸⁴ Safeguarding the language and national culture was a more consensual issue for the Georgian public, and a more immediate concern⁸⁵ than the far more abstract struggle for human and individual rights. This may also help to explain the great popularity of Zviad Gamsakhurdia during the presidential election of May 1991.

Looking Back

The involvement of intellectuals was decisive in the mobilization leading to the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-93. On this point, there is a general consensus among all parties involved. The Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, in his foreword to a book published during this war, described the use of historical arguments as one of the basest aspects of the conflict. He stressed the responsibility of historians, but gave no indication whatsoever of the particular kind of

arguments he had in mind. In his view, the perversion of scientific knowledge was part of an orchestrated campaign to sow the seeds of hatred between the two communities (he also left open the question of who might have orchestrated this campaign): 'First of all, the battleground was thoroughly prepared by an orchestrated stream of propaganda. It is said that when cannons are firing, the Muses fall silent, but here the Muse of History, Clio, has been deliberately perverted. Pseudo-historians with their pseudo-history have falsified the past and poisoned the present. The seeds of hatred have been intentionally sown'.⁸⁶ George Hewitt, Professor of Caucasian Languages at the University of London, who has come to be seen as a partisan of the Abkhazian cause, pointed to the sole responsibility of Georgian scholars in his condemnation of the abuse of scientific tools for the sake of nationalism: 'And perhaps the basest aspect of the long-running confrontation is the way that some academics in Tbilisi have been prepared over the years to prostitute their disciplines in the service of local chauvinist politics'.⁸⁷ Paul B. Henze, a senior researcher at the Rand Corporation, proposed an opposite view in a travel report on Abkhazia written after the war, where he wrote that the Abkhazian leadership was entirely lacking in popular support. Its motives were inspired by intellectual abstractions and were completely foreign to the concerns of its own community. In his opinion, 'Abkhaz separatism has been almost entirely an intellectual phenomenon'.⁸⁸

Shevardnadze's statement – that the involvement of intellectuals in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was part of a bigger plot to set both communities against each other – reflected a widespread assumption in Georgia. According to one of the variants of this type of interpretation, Gamsakhurdia and his followers were 'involuntary assistants of imperial forces that sought to form an anti-Georgian coalition on ethnic and religious grounds by uniting all non-Georgians residing in Georgia, and partly Muslim Georgians (Ajarians, Meskhetians) too, through a common fear of Georgian nationalism and fanaticism'.⁸⁹ Other interpretative variants refer to provocation against Shevardnadze himself, who is said to have miscalculated the possibility of pacifying Abkhazia by sending in troops in August 1992. Such conspiracy theories have the ideological consequence of shifting responsibility from Georgia's leadership to the Russian authorities. As historical myths, they are not entirely devoid of truth. The Soviet and Russian authorities have indeed played an active role in Georgian-Abkhazian relations, in order to defend a hegemonic position. A further variant of the analysis of the conflict in terms of Russia's involvement and primary responsibility is illustrated in Naira Gelashvili's book, which was written during the 1992-93 war. She describes the common history of the Georgians and Abkhazians as a relationship which was harmonious in principle but was destroyed by Russia's treacherous role in choosing to follow a divide-and-rule policy. In the past, Georgians had attempted to create a common front against Russian imperial policies. Gelashvili

points out a number of Georgian intellectuals from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who opposed the Russian policy of cultural assimilation and favoured the emergence of Abkhazian culture.⁹⁰ Such an analysis fits with Georgia's self-image as a nation longing, for two whole centuries, for national emancipation from Russian rule, but is hardly convincing to Abkhaz historians who, on the contrary, draw largely on examples of Georgian intellectuals and politicians who supported the Russian and Soviet policies of assimilation and oppression.

Georgian-Abkhazian relations constitute long-term cycles of victimization in which the perpetration of aggression or the refusal to redress historical injustices is justified by a previous victimization, so that every community considers that it has objective grounds for seeing itself as a victim and refusing to acknowledge guilt.⁹¹ Intellectuals have a particular responsibility in the perpetuation of such historical memories and in designing ways to overcome them. Introspection, however, is difficult for the Georgian and Abkhazian intellectuals who were directly involved in the conflict. For many of them, further involvement in political debates on Georgian-Abkhazian relations have been made impossible by the war itself and its consequences. The collapse of economic activities has seriously affected scientific and educational institutions, leaving scholars with more pressing material concerns than the legitimization of territorial or political claims. Both communities are now far less receptive to ideological mobilization than before the war. Their governments are less in need of ideological legitimization than practical know-how for rebuilding their shattered societies. Intellectuals who previously played a prominent role in guiding popular mobilization have at present little or no access to the ruling circles or to political decision-makers.⁹²

Insofar as the scholarly legitimization of political demands in international forums are concerned, yesterday's discourses on the region's history are not particularly useful. International security organizations have no great interest in questions such as the territorial location of proto-Georgian or proto-Abkhazian identities. Georgian and Abkhazian scholarly communities are ill prepared to address the political issues facing their communities. Intellectuals have not played a significant role in the negotiations on sovereign rights for Georgia and Abkhazia or on the creation of a common state. This is partly due to the lack of local expertise in the particular fields that are relevant to these negotiations. Modernizing the political system in order to overcome ethnic conflict would necessitate an apprenticeship in certain scientific skills, especially in the legal and administrative fields, for which no resources are available at present. This is particularly true for Abkhazia, with its small population, which is also suffering the consequences of its isolation from the outside world. Only some resources can be drawn from co-operation with foreign NGOs and academic institutions, which generally focus on building trust between the two national communities.

The Abkhazian community in Abkhazia is not politically homogenous. Abkhazian scholars, however, wish to remain loyal to their community. Many of them view the strength of this small community as residing largely in its capacity to speak with a single voice. The negative consequences of such apparent unity for the public debate on future alternatives for Abkhazia are all too apparent.

Particularly difficult is the issue of the consequences of the war for the cohabitation of the various national communities in Abkhazia. Georgian refugees had been able to return only to the Gali region in Abkhazia, which is populated almost exclusively by Mingrelian Georgians. Confronted with the accusation of ethnic cleansing, which has been raised regularly in UN Security Council discussions and was included in the final declarations of OSCE summits,⁹³ a number of Abkhazian scholars have taken a position on this issue. They deny the responsibility of the Abkhazian authorities for the fate of the displaced persons. In the view of the Abkhazian authors involved in this discussion, the mass repatriation of Georgian refugees to the whole of Abkhazia without international guarantees for the Abkhazian community itself could only be allowed after a peace agreement. The early return of all refugees would lead to new clashes and new military intervention by Tbilisi. Political concessions from the other side are expected, whereas no answer is offered by Abkhazian intellectuals to the key question of how and with what institutional guarantees the Georgian population can be included in Abkhazia's political future. The Abkhazian perception of the Georgian community of Abkhazia as an instrument of colonization and foreign rule is no less decisive in the design of common political institutions in Abkhazia than the Georgian view of Abkhazia as being primarily a Georgian land. In both communities, it will probably remain difficult to achieve a critical assessment of the history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations as long as their future remains unsettled.

Notes

¹ The following chapter is based on a number of interviews in Georgia and Abkhazia. I have to thank Emil Adelkhanov, Tamaz Beridze, David Darchiashvili, Stanislav Lakoba, Mariam Lordkipanidze and Avtandil Menteshashvili for sharing their views with me on this matter. George Hewitt and Viacheslav Chirikba have sent me precious documentation. I am also grateful to Rachel Clogg, David Darchiashvili, J. Paul Goode, Michel Huysseune, Richard Reeve, Xiaokun Song and Alexei Zverev for comments on the first draft of this paper.

² *The History of Herodotus*, Second Book. The English translation, by George Rawlinson, is available on the *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/herodotus-history.txt> On the views of Herodotus see Otar Lordkipanidze, *Archäologie in Georgien. Von der Altsteinzeit zum Mittelalter*, Weinheim, VCH Acta Humanoria, 1991, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*

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- ⁴ César Famin, 'Région Caucasienne', in *L'Univers, ou Histoire et description de tous les peuples, de leurs religions, moeurs, coutumes, etc.*, Weimar, Grossherzogl. Sächs. Priv. Landes-Industrie-Comptoirs, 1824, p. 16.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19. In reconstructing the past history of the Caucasus, Famin makes extensive use of ancient sources and mythical and religious narratives, despite the author's criticism of these sources as being highly speculative.
- ⁷ On the use made of history under the rule of the Bagrationi see Thorniké Gordadzé, 'La réforme du passé. L'effort historiographique de construction de la nation géorgienne', *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1999, p. 75.
- ⁸ On the following see Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Politics in Perspective*, London, Routledge, 1998; Jürgen Gerber, *Georgien: Nationale Opposition und kommunistische Herrschaft seit 1956*, Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlag, 1997, pp. 123-124; Stanislav Lakoba, 'History: 1917-1989', in George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians*, Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1999, pp. 94-96; Naira Gelaschwili, *Georgien. Ein Paradies in Trümmern*, Berlin, Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1993.
- ⁹ Of the 644 delegates to the Tenth Georgian Party Congress in May 1937, 425 were arrested and shot. See Amy Knight, *Beria. Stalin's First Lieutenant*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 84.
- ¹⁰ See Vernon V. Aspaturian, *The Union Republics in Soviet Diplomacy. A Study of Soviet Federalism in the Service of Soviet Foreign Policy*, Geneva and Paris, E. Droz and Minard, 1960, p. 126.
- ¹¹ On Beria's party career see *Lavrentii Beria, 1953. Dokumenty*, Moscow, Mezhdunarodnyi fond 'Demokratiya', 1999, pp. 429-430.
- ¹² Georgian authors would generally use the transliteration 'Sukhumi' in English texts, whereas Abkhazian scholars would drop the 'i' and write 'Sukhum'. I refer to 'Sukhum(i)' in order to avoid choosing between the Georgian and the Abkhazian preferences.
- ¹³ Knight, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- ¹⁴ In his study cited above, César Famin describes how the Abkhazians were involved in conflicts with the neighbouring communities and settlements of the Russians, Mingrelians and Cherkessians: 'The Georgians call the Abases by the name of *Abkasā*; several geographers call their country *Abkasia*, and even *Avogasā*; they themselves, finally, have adopted the name *Abzné*... The Abases live in a state of perpetual hostility with their neighbours, the Russians of *Soudjouk-Kalé* and the Mingrelians; but they have no more redoubtable enemies than the very people they would seem most likely to get along with – the Cherkessians.' Famin, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- ¹⁵ According to the 1939 census data. Cf. Daniel Müller, 'Demography', in Hewitt (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 235-6.
- ¹⁶ From 1926 to 1954, Abkhazian orthography was changed four times: in 1926 the alphabet based on Russian characters was replaced by one with Latin characters. This was then replaced by another Roman-based alphabet in 1928. This was in turn changed in 1937 into an alphabet based on Georgian characters and finally, in 1954, into the current Cyrillic-based one. See Vasilij Avidzba, 'Literature & Linguistic Politics', in Hewitt (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 177.
- ¹⁷ G. Hewitt (author's name was withheld in the publication), "'Guests" on their own territory', *Index on Censorship*, 1/90, p. 23.
- ¹⁸ Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 235; Darrell Slider, 'Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: the Case of Abkhazia', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1985, p. 52. During the period 1926-39, the immigration of the Russian, Greek and Armenian population was far higher than that of Georgians.
- ¹⁹ On this issue see Lakoba, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-85.

In Defence of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

- ²⁰ On Ingoroqva see 'Appendix to Documents from the KGB Archive in Sukhum. Abkhazia in the Stalin Years', translated by B.G. Hewitt, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996, p. 267; George Hewitt, Introduction to Hewitt (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 18 ff.; Lakoba, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-18; Gerber, pp. 125-126. The thesis that Abkhazians were relative latecomers in the region was first propounded by the Georgian historian Davit Bakradze in 1889. See George Hewitt, 'The Role of Scholars in the Abkhazians' Loss of Trust in the Georgians and How to Remedy the Situation', in Mehmet Tütüncü (ed.), *Caucasus: War and Peace*, Haarlem, Sota, 1998, p. 118.
- ²¹ According to George Hewitt (personal communication), plans to deport the Abkhazians in 1948 were cancelled at the last minute. Ingoroqva's thesis had originally been published in a journal in the late 1940s.
- ²² Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- ²³ Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth, *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 171.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- ²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 127.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- ²⁷ According to the figures reproduced in Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia. Space, Society, Politics*, London, UCL Press, p. 74.
- ²⁸ Gelaschwili, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-149; Gerber, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-95.
- ²⁹ On the following see Slider, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-61; Gerber, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-135; Ronald Grigor Suny, 'On the Road to Independence: Cultural Cohesion and Ethnic Revival in a Multinational Society', in R. S. Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change. Essays on the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 395.
- ³⁰ Lakoba, *op. cit.*, p. 98. In the early days of this television station, there was even less broadcasting in the Abkhazian language.
- ³¹ Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- ³² *Ibid.*, pp. 153-160.
- ³³ See Ghia Nodia, 'The Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances', in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia and Yuri Anchabadze (eds), *Georgians and Abkhazians. The Search for a Peace Settlement*, Sonderveröffentlichung des Bundesinstituts für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, Cologne, Oktober 1998, p. 25.
- ³⁴ Gelaschwili, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
- ³⁵ Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus. Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, London, Gothic Image, 1994, p. 32.
- ³⁶ On Abkhazian-Georgian relations during perestroika see Gerber, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-147.
- ³⁷ Hewitt, 'The Role of Scholars in the Abkhazians' Loss of Trust in the Georgians and how to Remedy the Situation', *op. cit.*, p. 120; Hewitt (ed.) p. 19.
- ³⁸ Gerber, *op. cit.* p. 139; Chervonnaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56.
- ³⁹ On the conflict with South Ossetia see Alexei Zverev, 'Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994', in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels, VUBPRESS, 1996, pp. 13-71, also on <http://poli.vub.ac.be/>
- ⁴⁰ B.G. Hewitt, 'A Reply to Paul Henze's Views on Georgia', 1993, on the website www.apsny.org; Yuri Anchabadze, 'History: the Modern Period', in Hewitt (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 133; Viktor Popkov, 'Soviet Abkhazia 1989: a Personal Account', in Hewitt (ed.), p. 105; Naira Gelaschwili, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-98; Zaira K. Khiba, 'An Abkhazian's Response', *Index on Censorship*, 5/90, pp. 30-31.

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- ⁴¹ Lakoba, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- ⁴² Gueorgui Otyrba, 'War in Abkhazia. The Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict', in Roman Szporluk (ed.), *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1994, p. 286.
- ⁴³ See for instance Fazil Iskander, *Sandro of Chegem*, London/Boston, Faber and Faber, 1993.
- ⁴⁴ Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- ⁴⁵ On the following see the chronology published in Jonathan Cohen (ed.), 'A Question of Sovereignty. The Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process', *Accord. An International Review of Peace Initiatives*, Issue 7, 1999, pp. 80-87.
- ⁴⁶ Otyrba, *op. cit.*, p. 287; Lakoba, p. 93. On the 1925 Constitution see Gerber, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.
- ⁴⁷ On the following see Bruno Coppieters, 'Shades of Grey. Intentions, Motives and Moral Responsibility in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict', in Coppieters, Nodia, Anchabadze (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 157-164.
- ⁴⁸ See Gerber's explanations of the growing tensions between the Georgian and Abkhazian communities in the post-Stalinist period. Gerber, *op. cit.*, pp. 127 ff.
- ⁴⁹ An exceptional political over-representation of the titular nation was also characteristic of the Armenian republic. G. Hodnett, 'Leadership in the Soviet Republics. A Quantitative Study of Recruitment Policy', Oakville, 1978, pp. 98-114, quoted in Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.
- ⁵¹ Smith *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ⁵² Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- ⁵³ Mark Saroyan, 'Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia', in Suny (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 408.
- ⁵⁴ Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- ⁵⁵ Lordkipanidze refers to the Abkhazians as 'Apsua' to differentiate them as an ethnic group among the inhabitants of Abkhazia.
- ⁵⁶ Mariam Lordkipanidze, *Essays on Georgian History*. Tbilisi, Metsniereba, 1994, pp. 207-208.
- ⁵⁷ According to the Soviet tradition, the first step in a research career is the defence of a 'candidate's dissertation', while the second is the defence of a doctoral dissertation. This second doctorate can be compared to a 'doctorat d'État' in France or a 'Habilitation' in Germany.
- ⁵⁸ Svetlana Chervonnaya even went so far as to depict the Moscow Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, for instance, as 'the ideological headquarters' of the Abkhazian secessionist movement. Chervonnaya, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- ⁵⁹ Galina Starovoitova, 'Nationality Policies in the Period of Perestroika: Some Comments from a Political Actor', in Gail W. Lapidus, Victor Zaslavsky with Philip Goldman, *From Union to Commonwealth. Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 120. On this discussion see Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 351-353.
- ⁶⁰ Gail Lapidus, 'The Impact of Perestroika on the National Question', in Lapidus, Zaslavsky with Goldman, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- ⁶¹ Anchabadze, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ⁶³ On the objective dimension of the meaning given to 'homeland' in the former Soviet Union see Kaiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-10.
- ⁶⁴ Oliver Reisner, 'What Can and Should We Learn From Georgian History? Observations of Someone Who Was Trained in the Western Tradition of Science', *Internationale Schulbuchforschung/International Textbook Research*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1998, pp. 418-419.

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- ⁶⁵ Kaiser defines the homeland as 'the geographical cradle of the nation and also the "natural" place where the nation is to fulfil its destiny': Kaiser, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ⁶⁶ Smith *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
- ⁶⁷ See Victor A. Shnirelman, 'From Internationalism to Nationalism: Forgotten Pages of Soviet Archaeology in the 1930s and 1940s', in Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (eds), *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 120-138.
- ⁶⁸ A criticism of essentialism in the archaeology of the Caucasus is to be found in Kohl and Tsetskhladze, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151.
- ⁶⁹ Philip L. Kohl and Gocha R. Tsetskhladze, 'Nationalism and Archaeology in the Caucasus', in Kohl and Fawcett, *op. cit.*, p. 158. This estimation was confirmed to me by archaeologist Viktor Loginov from Abkhazia. There are, however, no precise figures which would make it possible to make a comparison with Israel, for instance.
- ⁷⁰ Smith *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- ⁷¹ 'There is no consensus in the scholarly literature regarding the oldest ethnic map of Western Georgia, particularly its Black Sea coast. However, this refers to an extremely remote period (6th-5th millennia BC), about which there cannot be any discussion of a concrete ethnos, whereas from the second millennium BC, when the picture is relatively clearer, a mainly Kartvelian population is presumed to inhabit Western Transcaucasia. From this latter period up to Classical times, the archaeological material suggests the existence here of a common Colchian, i.e. Kartvelian, culture. (...) In the second and first millennia BC the Kartvelian (properly Svan) ethnic element was widespread in the mountainous and lowland regions of Western Georgia. This conclusion is supported by the evidence of ancient Greek mythology (the expedition of the Argonauts to Colchis) and linguistic research, which points to the existence here of a Kartvelian language by the time of the earliest contacts between Greeks and Colchians. Such a view is fully backed by the evidence of Classical written sources...' Mariam Lordkipanidze, *op. cit.*, p. 190. In this quotation, Kartvelian is a synonym for Georgian, and includes the sub-ethnic groups of Mingrelians, Svans and Laz. Mariam Lordkipanidze writes that she is not sure whether or not there were any non-Georgian tribes along the west of what is now Georgia, but she has no doubt about the predominance of Georgian culture in that region.
- ⁷² According to Philip L. Kohl the 'constructivist' perspective in Western scholarship would regard ethnogenesis as a minor matter compared with the study of ethnomorphosis, or the study of the changes that ethnic groups experience over time. See Philip L. Kohl, 'Nationalism and Archaeology: On the Constructions of Nations and the Reconstructions of the Remote Past', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, 1998, pp. 223-246.
- ⁷³ Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- ⁷⁴ Smith *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁷⁸ Ted Schatzki refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer. Ted Schatzki, 'Objectivity and Rationality', in Wolfgang Natter, Theodore R. Schatzki and John Paul Jones (eds), *Objectivity and Its Other*, New York, The Guilford Press, 1995, pp. 137-60.
- ⁷⁹ Stanislav Lakoba defines scientific objectivity in Georgian-Abkhazian relations negatively, by identifying it with not defending a pro-Georgian point of view. Lakoba, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

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- ⁸² On the distinction between an orthodox nationalism, loyal to the political system, and an unorthodox nationalism, challenging the system, see Rakowska-Harmstone quoted in Sakwa, *op. cit.*, p. 243.
- ⁸³ Gerber, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ⁸⁶ Eduard Shevardnadze, 'Foreword' to Chervonnaya, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.
- ⁸⁷ Hewitt, Introduction to Hewitt (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- ⁸⁸ Paul B. Henze, 'Abkhazia Diary – 1997', in Tütüncü (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- ⁸⁹ Chervonnaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.
- ⁹⁰ See Gelaschwili, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-66.
- ⁹¹ See Ronald D. Crelinsten, 'Prosecuting Gross Human-Rights Violations from the Perspective of the Victim', in Albert J. Jongman (ed.), *Contemporary Genocides: Causes, Cases, Consequences*, Leiden, PIOOM, 1996, pp. 175-185 and Coppieters, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
- ⁹² The number of books and brochures on the history of the region published in Georgia and Abkhazia continues to be significant: Georgian Academy of Sciences. Research Centre for Relations between Nations, *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia*, Tbilisi, Metsniereba, 1995; Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Istoricheskie predposylki sovremennogo separatizma v Gruzii*, Tbilisi, Tipografiya Tbilisskogo Universiteta, 1998; Grigorii Lezhava, *Mezhdru Gruzii i Rossiei. Istoricheskie korni i sovremennii faktory abkhazo-gruzinskogo konflikta (XIX-XX vv.)*, Moscow, Tsentr po izutscheniyu mezhnatsional'nykh otnoschenii, 1997; Spartak Zhidkov, *Brosok maloï imperii*, Maikop, Aligeia, 1996; Stanislav Lakoba, *Stoletnyaya voïna Gruzii protiv Abkhazii*, Gagra, Assotsiatsiya 'Intelligentsiya Abkhazii', 1993; Stanislav Lakoba, *Abkhaziya. Posle dvuch okkupatsii*, Gagra, Assotsiatsiya 'Intelligentsiya Abkhazii', 1994; Yermolai Adzhindzhal, *Iz istorii abkhazskoi gosudarstvennosti*, Sukhum, Assotsiatsiya 'Intelligentsiya Abkhazii', 1996; Yu. Voronov, *Abkhazy: kto oni?*, Gagra, Assotsiatsiya 'Intelligentsiya Abkhazii', 1993.
- ⁹³ <http://www.osce.org/docs/english/summite.htm>