

**INVENTING THE SELF: INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF HISTORY  
IN ABKHAZIAN-GEORGIAN CONFLICT**

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*Dedicated to Martin for his support and belief in me  
and to my dear friends Mose,  
Mariam and Bublik.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### *0.1. Introduction of the Topic*

The idea of self-determination has been strongly promoted on the international scene starting from the First World War. Ambiguous definition of the term and the units it applies to made its application problematic, leaving room for experiments and trials. Lack of legal background and abundance of political discourse allowed many of the ethnically conscious regions to demand independence from international organizations. As the case of Kosovo illustrates, such ventures have not always been unsuccessful, further encouraging autonomous or non-autonomous regions to push for recognition. Along with the claims of political self-sustainability, secessionist regions embarked on the program of cultural affirmation. Building the myth of the nation became one of the central aspects for mobilization of the society as well as an integral part of the discourse about the authenticity of the assertions for independence. Thus, almost every ethnically or nationally motivated conflict after the dissolution of the Soviet Block in the 1990's employed history for justifying political policies.

Construction of the new identity can be discerned in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as well, with both sides molding historical 'facts' to their particular claims. In the case of Georgia, similarities with Abkhazian ethnos, as well as shared culture and history were highly emphasized in the popular discourse. Abkhazia, on the other hand, built up its own separate identity drawing a clear line with Georgia and claiming that Abkhazians have always been different. History both regions have been struggling with remains the

same—nevertheless, the disparities in the revival of the past have made the reconciliation on the political level impossible.

Due to the increasing ‘trend’ of state building in the 1990’s and the subsequent conflict, sizeable amount of scholarly work has been produced in relation to Abkhazia. International organizations and NGOs have been trying to come up with the best solutions to the crisis. Most of the information however is political, looking over the issues of identity and self-creation.

My aim is to scrutinize the fluidity of the perception of ethnic identity generated through myths and symbols. ‘Nation’ in the conflict will not be defined as preexistent and organic, as an unchangeable reality which could not be accommodated due to the intrinsic dissimilarity in the essence of the Abkhazians and Georgians. Neither will it be viewed as a purely modern construct stemming from socio-economic or socio-cultural developments of the past two centuries.

Instead, I will argue that nationalism of the two regions is a phenomenon, which can be viewed only in its societal and institutional context in which ‘different groups compete to control [the] symbol and its meanings’<sup>1</sup>. In other words, rather than fighting for the self-evident reality, the two groups dispute over the ‘recreation’ of the self and the other<sup>2</sup>—the very identification of Abkhazians as separate or the same as Georgians exists partially due to the virtue of reproducing the identity in the social, political and cultural life. Although the arguments from both sides are substantiated by the ‘proofs’ from the

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?”, in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London, New York: Verso, 1996), 228.

<sup>2</sup> A.P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Ellis Horwood, 1985), 114.

past, the past is revived in a way as to fit the specific perception of what one is supposed to be, sometimes altering the ‘history’ to unrecognizable state. My broader objective is to demonstrate how much the confrontation between the ‘imagined nations’ can shape and orient the minds of the people into hating the ‘other’.

By this proposition I do not mean to disregard significant economic or political aspect of the conflict, the impact of which cannot be downgraded. Instead, I choose to cover only one of the portions of the confrontation—which is the role of historiography in substantiating the actions of the two communities and in undermining successful negotiations at present.

## ***0.2. Structure and Significance of the Research***

Structurally my argument is organized around the assessment of the historical narratives presented in the Abkhazian and Georgian history textbooks. Comparing the books from both regions will give me an opportunity to discern the formation of two different histories and how they attempt to construct a reality best fitting the conflict as perceived by each side based on either tangible or intangible past.

After introducing the topic and explaining the content, I will offer a theoretical overview of the idea of ‘fluid national identity’, pointing out the main approaches that I intend to use. The second chapter will go into the historical background of the conflict, emphasizing the ‘disputable’ aspects of the confrontation. In the third chapter the significance of the Soviet legacy in creating nationally charged atmosphere in the 1980’s is pointed out. The fourth chapter presents the actual research—comparison of the ‘two different histories’ created from the same past by the Abkhazian and Georgian historians.

The last chapter offers additional information about the impact of historiography in the context of Georgian and Abkhazian conflict. Lastly, I sum up my argument and stress the value of historical reconciliation in the ongoing conflict.

As I already pointed out, the work is mostly based on the analysis of the school books from both Abkhazia and Georgia. I have also used nationalism theories for the creating the theoretical framework of the study. Historical background, as well as the evaluation of Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation in the intellectual sphere will be substantiated by articles and books by influential scholars working on the Georgian-Abkhazian and Caucasian region.

In my view, understanding the patterns of identity building is crucial for ideological reconciliation. What Georgian perception of the conflict fails to address, is the explanation of the conflict from the Abkhazian side—why did Abkhazians want to separate? What was the basis of the secessionist claims? At the same time, the blame for the conflict is placed on Russia, skillfully deteriorating the ‘once-perfect’ relations with Abkhazia. Abkhazia, on the other hand, is unwilling to acknowledge the role of Georgian culture and politics in shaping the region. If the stories of the communities will not be expanded as to incorporate the version of the other, objective definition of the reality will be impossible. Which, in turn, will affect the political solution of the conflict.

## Chapter 1: Historical Narrative as an Integral Part of National Identity

Georgian and Abkhazian nations started to acquire their shape and form in the late nineteenth century. Before this period, due to the complex web of authority sharing and persistent influence from numerous empires and kingdoms, common feeling of one ‘nation’ was weak. Solidarity was rather bound to the regional affiliation within small provinces that were divided between larger entities.

Consolidation process was the reaction to the foreign governments ‘to eliminate the peculiarities of the peoples of Transcaucasia’<sup>3</sup>. The process was accompanied by mutual struggle for the ‘allotment’ of past. Centuries-long co-existence in a small territory has produced ‘blurred’ cultural or ethnical boundaries that emerged as the subject of dispute. Moreover, the ‘patchy’ nature of present Georgia with numerous principalities with their distinct characteristics, made it harder for autonomous units to demonstrate their separateness on the basis of unique characteristics. In the 1980’s confrontation between Abkhazia and Georgia was strongly echoed in the scholarly field, which often fused with the political developments. Georgia emerged as the pretender on its ‘historical’ territory disregarding ethnic distinctness of Abkhazians.

In this period, a strong tendency to employ myths and symbols for self-identification can be identified. Due to this trend, my research greatly relies on the ethno-symbolic interpretation of nationalism for deciphering the nature of Georgian-Abkhazian

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Emergence of Political Society in Georgia”, in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press: 1996), 110.

conflict. At the same time, I incorporate some aspects of constructivist approach to the subject.

Ethno-symbolic theory underlines the significance of ‘the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted’<sup>4</sup>. This ‘past material’ empowers the present-day nationalisms with the authority and legitimacy to justify their political or cultural claims. Anthony D. Smith, the originator of this view, argues that rather than being just ‘invented traditions’ for the manipulation of the society, history and culture represent the integral part of the popular vision, social structures and processes through which the political strategies generate. In this way, recreation of history is in itself the process of ‘being a nation’, since for the survival of the collective identity shared memories have to be cultivated and developed.<sup>5</sup>

Popular history transforms with the changing boundaries and political situation. With every generation new symbols and believes are reconstituted, resulting in the ever-altering nature of the individual nations. Due to this, historical past offered in the textbooks should not be read at its face-value, as an undoubted reality ‘remembered’ for the sake of consolidating a nation. History has to be seen in the light of the nationalist present: the strives and claims of the given nation today bend and transform the past in the way best capable of providing the support and evidence for the present assertions. Considering this feature of history-writing, today’s popular history in Abkhazia and

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Georgia should mirror the aspirations of the national politics of the regions. In other words, claims about the continuous confrontation of the Abkhazians and Georgians or arguments for their inseparable unity, should not be viewed as undoubted truth.

This historical aspect of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict has been advocated Bruno Coppieters, political scientist concentrating on the ethnic wars and secessions in the Caucasus. Having written considerable amount of scholarly work on Georgia, he believes that there is instrumental correlation between the political goals of the state and the academic sphere. Although he places more accent on the elite manipulation of the popular discourse, he agrees that scholars can play in important role in constructing the opposing identities, which can be decisive for the development of secessionist movements.<sup>6</sup>

However, past cannot be recreated out of the thin air. According to Smith, some elements of history need to be transmitted to the present definition of the nation in order to establish continuity. This involves elements such as ‘names, symbols, languages, customs, territories and rituals of national identity’<sup>7</sup>. In addition to this, six ‘preconditions’ are crucial for becoming an ethnically defined group: collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity<sup>8</sup>. What happens if these elements are

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Coppieters, “In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict”, in *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huyseune (Brussels University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “Place, Kinship and the Case for Non-Ethnic Nations”, in *History and National Destiny: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 52.

shared, or disputed between the two nations? Although, in a way both Abkhazia and Georgia emerged well-equipped with these necessary ‘tools’ for self-definition, objective existence of the abovementioned characteristics can be disputed. In both, Georgian and Abkhazian cases, large part of the history is the subject to dispute, making it impossible to determine the legitimate ‘owner’ of the past. For example both regions lay claims on the same period and same territory, the kingdom of Abkhazia (9<sup>th</sup> century). Abkhazians argue that the kingdom was founded by the Abkhazians and serves the justification of their independence, while Georgians maintain that in spite of the name, language and culture was mostly Georgian<sup>9</sup>. Clearly, employment of historical and anthropological documents, which can be seen as the samples of ‘history’, has played an important role in supporting nationalist assertions. However, national consolidation has been mostly left to the manner in which that history interpreted.<sup>10</sup> Only given the willingness to define oneself as unique and distinct, could the abovementioned factors serve the identity reification process<sup>11</sup>.

At this point of divergence of my case-study from ethno-symbolism, constructivist theory serves as the supplementary background. Rather than defining nation as built around tangible characteristics or ‘ethnic core’, Rogers Brubaker proposes the nation as a category, which ‘is invoked, institutionalized and more generally used as a

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<sup>9</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Liah Greenfield, “Etymology, Definition, Types”, in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, ed. Alexander J. Motyl, vol. 1 (Academic Press: 2000).

‘cognitive frame’<sup>12</sup>. Thus, instead of real symbols or touchable past, nation is based on the ‘set of beliefs, perceptions, understandings and identifications’<sup>13</sup>. This can be considered especially true in case of Georgia and Abkhazia where the past is arguable for the both sides. So the very ways in which the ‘nation’ is ‘remembered’ in case of Abkhazia and Georgia will assist the comprehension of the emergence and perseverance of the conflict.

However, forgetting, just like remembering, is the foremost component of nationalism since the very act of remembering involves forgetting of some events. For example, ‘the nation, which celebrates its antiquity, forgets its historical recency’<sup>14</sup>. Also, the violent means, through which the nation is created is often ‘left out’ or forgotten. This is especially true of Georgia, the unification wars of which starting from the tenth century involved bloodshed for the sake of unanimity. This way, the very symbolic nature of nationalism is forgotten due to the mass act of forgetting.

Perception of the nation as a ‘cognitive frame’ might bring us to assuming its ‘imagined’ nature. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, illuminates this concept by claiming that membership into a nation requires the process of imagination, through which we identify with those members of the community whom we have never met or seen. Imagination of the nation played a crucial role in the late nineteenth century

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<sup>12</sup> Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity as Cognition”, in *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Billig, “Banal Nationalism”, in *Nations and nationalism: A Reader*, ed. Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2005), 185.

when Abkhazian and Georgian nationalisms were being formulated<sup>15</sup>. Unified economy introduced by the Tsarist Russia and modern ways of communication, have enforced the feeling of oneness, especially among the Georgians, who created the image of united Georgia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia within its borders<sup>16</sup>. In the modern times, during the war between the two regions, media and popular discourse strongly reinforced the already existent national identifications and extended them to the ‘unknown brothers’ in different parts of the country. This symbolic ‘belonging’ further developed by Cohen, also explains the ‘choice’ of the Abkhazians to reject the Georgians as inferior, at the same time welcoming the influence of other ethnic groups<sup>17</sup>.

Institutionalization of nation also happens through the enforcement of the so-called ‘banal nationalism’ suggested by Michael Billig. Here, the significance of the everyday use of flag, language, songs, maps, anthems, coins, memorials and other national symbols is stressed as the central aspect for enforcing national belonging<sup>18</sup>. ‘Banal nationalism’ can be especially applied to the Abkhazian case since the region had to device and promote ‘national symbols’ much later than the Georgian state. Banal nationalism, both in Abkhazia and Georgia, has greatly contributed to making it impossible to forget ‘what we are’ in terms of nationality, further exacerbating the ongoing conflict.

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<sup>15</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Emergence of Political Society in Georgia”, in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press: 1996), 110.

<sup>17</sup> Graham Day and Andrew Thompson, *Theorizing Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

In both, ethno-symbolic and constructivist discourse, nation is mostly defined in terms of the cultural values—memories, beliefs and perceptions—granting it greater flexibility in terms of membership. Rather than delineating oneself with ethnic criteria of membership, this kind of definition of nation allows ‘for a degree of demographic replenishment and cultural borrowing, and hence social and cultural adaptation’<sup>19</sup>. This is especially important in case of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, where, as I already mentioned ethnic and cultural boundaries have dissolved over centuries, mostly leaving the feeling of ‘belonging’ to either side.

How can we then explain the sentiment and belonging to the nation, if the very nation is a ‘construct’? How can the nation be ‘equally felt and willed community’<sup>20</sup>? Although constructivism endorses illusionary nature of the nation, some kind of ‘evidence’ from the past is still necessary, be it language, territory, traditions or symbols. Moreover, Everyday nationalism plays a great role in concealing ‘the very elusiveness and contingency of the nation’s precarious existence’<sup>21</sup> and in reinforcing the sense of belonging. To sum up all the abovementioned theories, I believe that the essence of the ‘nation’ is a subject to the ways in which it is constructed through the remembrance of the ‘past, which is not a ‘pre-given’ reality, but rather a patch of memories or artifacts that can be molded to the specific understanding of the present depending on the political and cultural standing of the given community. Existence of any kind of community in

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 59.

<sup>21</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “Blood, Soil and Identity”, *Sociological Review* 40 (1992): 677.

turn, implies specific way of perceiving oneself and the other, which represents an ordinary social process of encountering the world.

The official ‘nation building’ process in the Caucasus started mostly in the 1990’s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed full-flown practice of the national ‘traditions’. Abkhazia and Georgia employed ‘ancient materials’ for substantiating new arguments. Revitalization of traditions was happening on the basis of ritualizing cultural characteristics: folksongs, national symbols (anthems, flags, icons), important historical events.<sup>22</sup> This was especially true of Abkhazia: for the first time the region had to collect and mobilize its identity against the ‘significant other’. Invention of traditions was used for two main purposes: to strengthen the group cohesion, and to legitimize political actions.

Nowadays, the popular Georgian narrative is caught up between the necessity of political concessions and unwillingness to acknowledge the responsibility for the war. There is a general trend in the history textbooks to overlook the military clash and failures of both sides: ‘oneness’ of Georgia and Abkhazia is promoted through emphasizing common history and culture, while the blame for the conflict is placed not on Abkhazians but on the ‘disobedient separatists’ who operated motivated and heartened by Russia. Involvement of the Georgian army in the conflict is also portrayed as involuntary—a result provocations and the absence of strong state control. Thus, effort is made to forget great share of the past.

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<sup>22</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

In my view, in order to achieve a healthy perspective on the conflict, it is necessary to accommodate the claims of the both sides in the intellectual sphere and realize the ‘elusiveness’ of historical ‘evidence’. Political negotiations have to go hand in hand with the recognition of the fault of the both sides in the escalation of violence and unwillingness to engage in open debates about past and present<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Dov Lynch, “Separatist States and Post-Soviet Conflicts”, *International Affairs* 78 (4) (2002): 831-848.

## Chapter 2: Facts and Underlying Factors of Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict

Before moving on to the actual comparison of Abkhazian and Georgian history-writing, some basic background has to be offered about the conflict itself. The confrontation became feasible already in the first half of the twentieth century, when Abkhazia was unwillingly included in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Since then Abkhazians felt oppressed by the Georgian majority and at several occasions have expressed their dissatisfaction either due to limited autonomy or unequal rights. The years of the Stalinist terror were unbearable for the whole Soviet Union, however, as Bruno Coppieters suggests, the terror acquired a new meaning for Abkhazians since the main ‘perpetrators’, Beria and Stalin, were Georgians<sup>24</sup>. The situation was further aggravated by the apparent policy of Georgianization in the 1930’s. This policy included the resettling of the Abkhazian population, changing the script to the Georgian alphabet<sup>25</sup>, closing down Abkhazian schools and ‘colonization’ of the region<sup>26</sup>. Although the process can also be viewed as part of the general trend of the period to promote superiority of the titular nations in the Soviet Union, in Abkhazia it was given ethnic coloring and ascribed to the ferocity of Georgian ‘ethnie’ as such. Georgians, on the other hand, seemed

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<sup>24</sup> Bruno Coppieters, “In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict”, in *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, eds. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huyseune (VUB Brussels University Press, 2002), 91.

<sup>25</sup> Vasilij Avidzba, “Literature & Linguistic Politics”, in *The Abkhazians*, ed. George Hewitt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 177.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Mueller, “Demography”, in *The Abkhazians*, ed. George Hewitt (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 235-236.

unwilling to ‘assume any responsibility for Stalin’s or Beria’s actions’<sup>27</sup>, claiming that the same repressions were enforced in Georgia.

Thus, Stalinist era deteriorated the already strained relations between the two communities. Abkhazians felt that Tbilisi was trying to increase its control over the territory. 1956, 1967, 1978 Abkhaz intellectuals petitioned the Centre to separate from Georgia and join Russia, however, their requests were not satisfied. Instead, they were granted numerous cultural concessions. By 1988 Abkhazia had its own radio and TV station out of the Georgian control, its National University, publishing house and theatre; more importantly, Abkhazians were overrepresented in the administration. Nevertheless, nationalist agendas were already being formulated among the local elites and intellectuals.<sup>28</sup>

### **2.1. Deteriorating Relations**

Already in 1988 Abkhazians started taking measures in order to be separated from Georgia. In July the ‘Abkhazian Letter’ was sent to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Conference of CPSU, in which leading Abkhazian figures were asking to raise the Status of Abkhazia to a Union Republic<sup>29</sup>. This served as a principal rationale behind the strained relationship

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<sup>27</sup> Bruno Coppieters, “In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict”, in *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huyseune (VUB Brussels University Press, 2002), 107.

<sup>28</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 39.

Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990* (London: University of London, 1991), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990* (London: University of London, 1991), 24.

between the two ethnic groups within the confines of Abkhazia, and especially in its capital Sukhumi.

However, the turning point was the Lykhny Declaration of 18 March 1989, when around 30,000 Abkhazians met in the village of Lykhny and ‘approved a document calling on Moscow to recognize Abkhazia as a full Union republic’<sup>30</sup>. Georgian Supreme Soviet publicly condemned the declaration and called the Georgian students in Abkhazia to rally against the ‘traitors’. However, the Lykhny Appeal made it apparent that Abkhazian separatism constituted a mass movement rather than a small association of intellectuals.

In Tbilisi, the situation was echoed in the demonstrations of 4 April, when thousands of protesters gathered in front of the Government building. Demands against the Abkhazian independence were broadened to include the call for the restoration of Georgian sovereignty. At this point, Moscow stepped in to provide the necessary martyrs to sanctify the movement. Condemning the demonstrators for instigating ethnic conflict, peaceful citizens were brutally ‘dispersed’ on 9 April in Tbilisi main avenue—killing nineteen students. The tragedy of 9 April was swiftly adopted as a symbol of independence by the radicals. At the same time, the incident became the ‘memorial’ of deteriorating Georgian-Abkhazian relations.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 41.

Manana Gurguliani, “The Role of Unofficial Diplomacy: Reality and Illusions”, in *Rol' Neofitsialnoi Diplomatii v Mirovorocheskom Protsesse (The Role of Unofficial Diplomacy in the Process of Peace-building) Georgian Abkhazian Conference held in Sochi, March 1999* (Irvine: University of California, 1999), 114.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 44.

Meanwhile, hostilities erupted in Abkhazia as well. After Georgian demand for the opening of the Georgian branch of Abkhazian University was satisfied, the building was picketed by the Abkhazian students. At the same time, in Ochamchira, another town in Abkhazia, twenty Georgians became the victims of clashes.<sup>32</sup>

Sensing the looming danger, in March 1990 Abkhazian delegation led by Zurab Achba visited Tbilisi with an attempt of cooperation. However, no agreement could be reached since the positions of the two sides were irreconcilable. Gamsakhurdia and his supporters were categorically against any concessions. Radical stance went hand in hand with the political spirit of the early 1990's, where both Abkhazian and Georgian democratic elements were strongly suppressed.<sup>33</sup>

In August 1990, Georgian Supreme Soviet passed an election law banning regionally based political groups from participating in the elections of the Georgian parliament. The act was explained by the inability of the non-Georgian parties to 'encompass the problems of the whole Georgia'. In response, on 25 August the Abkhazian parliament issued a declaration stipulating its withdrawal from the Georgian SSR.<sup>34</sup> The declaration asserted its legality referring to the 1989-1990 legislation adopted by the Georgian Supreme Soviet, which annulled all the treaties concluded before February 1921. Since Abkhazia was not officially part of Georgia by this time, it was proclaimed legally independent. Georgian government refused to accept this explanation and annulled Abkhazian declaration.

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990* (London: University of London, 1991), 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver Wolleh, *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogues in Press*. (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006), 13.

In the fall 1990, the leadership of the both regions is elected: Zviad Gamsakhurdia's party 'Round table—Free Georgia' wins the parliamentary elections of Georgia, while Vladislav Ardzinba becomes the chairman of Abkhazian Supreme Soviet<sup>35</sup>.

Soon after, Georgian Parliament enacts the law on the prefects, violating Abkhazian constitutional rights. In response, Vladislav Ardzinba establishes friendly contacts with the Russian military and welcomes Russian battalion in Sukhumi. Being left with no other alternative, Gamsakhurdia is forced to allow Abkhazian parliamentary elections with Abkhazian majority (October-December 1991)<sup>36</sup>. The electoral law was based on the over-representation of Abkhazians<sup>37</sup>.

Abkhazian Supreme Soviet met under the new quota system first in January 1992, when Gamsakhurdia was already removed from the office. In early 1992 Georgian deputies in Abkhazia complained about being discriminated and started boycotting the session of the parliament. This act by Georgian official representatives was perceived by the Georgian population as the authorization of the civil disobedience in Abkhazia.

<sup>35</sup> Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 42.

Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990* (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1991), 51.

Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajara before and since the Soviet Collapse", in *The Myth of "Ethnic Conflict": Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford (Center for Strategic and International Studies Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2001), 273.

<sup>36</sup> Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 43.

Bruno Coppieters, *Federalism and Conflict in the Caucasus* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 21.

<sup>37</sup> Oliver Wolleh, *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogues in Press* (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006), 14.

Julie Alynn George, "Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia", (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 149.

The same month, Abkhaz national guardsmen attacked the building of Abkhazia's Ministry of Internal Affairs mostly controlled by the Georgians—Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs was replaced by Arzindba's man<sup>38</sup>.

After the attempts and failure of the institutional agreement to legitimately divide power between the representatives of Abkhazia and Georgia, military confrontation seemed inevitable for both sides. The lack of success stemmed from the unwillingness of the both parties to 'abandon the hope of establishing an exclusive grip on the territory of Abkhazia'<sup>39</sup>. These positions, in turn, were strongly supported by the intellectual discussions of historical rights on the region.

## **2.2. Military Engagement**

In December 1991 Gamsakhurdia was removed from his post as a result of a military coup. At the request of the opposition, Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Tbilisi to lead the affairs as a chairman of the State Council. Shevardnadze was a highly respected individual in the West and was soon recognized as a leader despite the necessary democratic legitimization.<sup>40</sup>

Some historians believe that regardless of the nationalist rhetoric, Gamsakhurdia was more capable of negotiating with Ardzinba than Shevardnadze who made no

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<sup>38</sup> Ghia Nodia, "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia" (Berkley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper, Berkley, USA, 1997-1998), 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Coppieters, *Federalism and Conflict in the Caucasus* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 22.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Wolleh, *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogues in Press* (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006), 15.  
Anna Mateeva, "The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflicts and Minorities" (Report by Minority Rights Group International 2002), 9.

attempts to ‘discuss a possible political settlement to avoid violent measures’<sup>41</sup>. Georgian historian David Darchiashvili also suggests that although Shevardnadze’s language was more pragmatic, his actions were no less nationalistic.<sup>42</sup>

On 23 July 1992, Abkhazian Supreme Soviet declared the 1978 constitution invalid and adopted the 1925 Abkhazian constitution, which ‘declared that relations between the Georgian and Abkhazian republics were based on a union treaty and which granted the Republic of Abkhazia the right to secede’<sup>43</sup>. Georgian reaction to Abkhazia was to again pronounce the decision void on 25 July.<sup>44</sup>

In the same month, supporters of Gamsakhurdia took Georgian officials of Mingrelia (region bordering Abkhazia) as hostages and kept them in Gali Region in Abkhazia, at the same time disrupting the railway traffic. With the pretext of ‘regulating’ the situation, Georgian forces marched in Abkhazia on 14 August and confronted the Abkhaz National Guard in Sukhumi.

This excerpt from history has been largely debated in the past decades. Georgians claim that Abkhazians were aware that the goal of the operation was to regulate the

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<sup>41</sup> Julie Alynn George, “Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia”, (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 154.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from: Julie Alynn George, “Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia”, (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 154.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 71.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 133.

Julie Alynn George, “Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia”, (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 150.

Bruno Coppieters et al., *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution—Case Studies from the European Periphery* (Academia Press, 2004), 196.

railway and free the hostages, but they were still the first to open the fire<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, Ardzinba denies this version, claiming that no information about Georgian engagement was available<sup>46</sup>. It is also contentious whether the occupation of Sukhumi was a pre-planned move or the result of the disorganization in the Georgian military units. Nevertheless, it remains undisputed that serious atrocities were committed by the Georgian forces against the civilian population.

Ceasefire was negotiated in July 1993 and both forces retreated. However, on 18 August Kitovani, the head of the military, recaptured Sukhumi, occupied the Abkhazian parliament and removed the flag as a war trophy. According to the Abkhazian white book, around 2000 Abkhaz and other non-Georgians were killed during this assault<sup>47</sup>.

The same day, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, passed a resolution calling for volunteers among the Ingush, Adyghe, Chechens and others to join the Abkhazian forces against the Georgian ‘occupiers’.<sup>48</sup>

On 27 July another agreement of ceasefire was signed by Russian, Georgian and Abkhazian sides, this time in Sochi. However, part of the Georgian troops joined

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<sup>45</sup> Darrel Slider, “Democratization in Georgia”, in *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172. Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 48.

Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 134.

Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 119-120.

<sup>47</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 48.

Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 72.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 134.

Gasmakhurdia's supporters and remained in Abkhazia under the leadership of Loti Kobalia.

After this and other violations of the contract, Abkhazian counter-attack ejected the remaining Georgian troops from the region, along with a large part of the Georgian population. Many of the Georgians, who remained, were murdered by the Abkhazian troops. This demographic 'alteration' has been described as an 'ethnic cleansing' by many Georgians. Abkhazians reject this label, claiming that most of the brutalities were committed by the North Caucasian volunteers.<sup>49</sup>

### **2.3. Aftermath of the War—Frozen Conflict**

Negotiations started on 1 December 1993 under the supervision of UN. However, this did not mean the end of the hostilities. On 10 February 1994, on the scheduled day for the return of refugees the fighting revived. Abkhazians blamed Georgians for shooting at the guards, which served as a reason for denying access to the refugees<sup>50</sup>.

On 4 April Agreement was signed in Moscow on the voluntary return of the refugees. However, individuals involved in the military actions were not allowed to go back, which limited the amount of the returnees.

As a result of the next meeting between Shevardnadze, Ardzinba and Yeltsin, Georgian military equipment was removed from the war-zone and several hundred of Georgian families were allowed to return to Gali region. In addition around 40000 more

<sup>49</sup> Oliver Wolleh, *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogues in Press* (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006), 16.

<sup>50</sup> Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 57.

went back on their own. On 26 November 1994, Abkhaz parliament declared the independence of Abkhazia<sup>51</sup>.

Progress towards conflict resolution was interrupted when heavy fighting erupted in 1998 in Gali region. Georgian paramilitary group, the ‘White League’ ‘celebrated’ the anniversary of statehood by raising the Georgian flag above the government building in Abkhazian city of Gali. From Abkhaz perspective this event meant an open act of war.<sup>52</sup> They responded by eliminating guerillas with military force. Around 35,000 Georgians were again displaced during the confrontation.<sup>53</sup>

The war changed the demographic situation of Abkhazia considerably. Before the war, the republic’s population was around 545, 000, from which 45% were Georgians and 17% Abkhazians. During the war around 250,000 Georgians left Abkhazia, some more Abkhazians emigrated.<sup>54</sup>

Since 1998 negotiations have been much slower and eventless. Today the, secessionist demands are already very categorical. The conflict remains unsettled. Abkhazian independence is not internationally recognized and thus the region is still legally considered to be part of Georgia, although Tbilisi does not exercise any actual authority over the territory.

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<sup>51</sup> Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 58-9.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), prologue.

<sup>53</sup> Oliver Wolleh, *A Difficult Encounter – The Informal Georgian-Abkhazian Dialogues in Press* (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2006), 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

## 2.4. Russian Involvement in the Conflict

General view is that Russia did not have a single policy in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and its operations stemmed from the standpoints of the individual performers, mostly of the military<sup>55</sup>. Although Russia was supplying both sides, it is not denied that its position was predisposed towards Abkhazia.<sup>56</sup>

However, it has to be noted that most of the ceasefire agreements during the war were signed under Russian supervision. From 1994 onwards Eduard Shevardnadze accepted the condition of entering CIS in return for the military support in guarding the strategic roads against the rebels.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, in the Georgian perception Russia played a considerable part in inciting and promoting the hostilities. Georgians strongly believe that Russia orchestrated Abkhazian disengagement. Believing in the artificiality of the divergence between Abkhazia and Georgia, Georgians stayed insensitive to the demands of the minorities. Due to this, the validity of the secessionist agendas was nullified—Abkhazians, along with Ossetians were grouped with the Russians for taking part in the ‘conspiracy’ against Georgia.

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<sup>55</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 98.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Mateeva, *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflicts and Minorities* (Report by Minority Rights Group International 2002), 12.  
Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 195.

## Chapter 3: The Era of Nationalism and the Revival of the Pre-Democratic Political Mood

### 3.1. The Effects of the 'Wrong' Nationalities Policy

The ferocity of the post-Soviet secessionist and nationalist movements is often connected to the Soviet policy for nationalities. Most of the nations included in the Union had been under the foreign domination before uniting under socialism. 'In order to erode historic suspicions among non-Russians and gain popular support for the regime'<sup>58</sup>, national groups were granted concessions in terms of self-expression. Self-determination was offered as a 'reward' for joining the Soviet realm. Promotion of cultural diversity was seen as a way of keeping the political units satisfied and unwilling to seek autonomy or independence. At the same time, Bolshevik ideology promoted internationalism as the final stage of the consolidation of different nationalities in the union<sup>59</sup>. Thus, nationalities policy became the project of political maneuvering, 'attempting to shape the forms of national discourse while promoting bilingualism and a popular commitment to the Soviet project'<sup>60</sup>. Ghia Nodia also suggests that exactly due to the fact that internationalism was the mainstream Soviet ideology, nationalism became legitimized as an anti-Soviet

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union Collapse? (Understanding Historical Change)* (London: M.E. Sharpe, inc., 1998), 72.

<sup>59</sup> Julie Alynn George, "Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia", (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 73.

<sup>60</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "On the Road to Independence: Cultural Cohesion and Ethnic Revival in a Multinational Society", in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 400.

worldview.<sup>61</sup> As a result of this double-sided approach, cultural assimilation of different ethnic groups became impossible.

Nationalities policy was reinforced on several levels. First of all, the territorial administrative division of the empire bore a national character: union republics, as well as autonomous regions and oblasts, were defined in either ethnic or national terms. In line with this principle, titular nations had central positions in the administrative units. The 'linkage of ethnicity, territory, and political administration [...] enshrined the idea of national statehood'<sup>62</sup>. This distinction was supposed to be temporary, until all the nationalities would dissolve into an all-Soviet identity. However, ethnoterritorial organization of the state formation, downgraded the traditional social identities such as class, clan, tribe and gave way to a new 'overarching identity based on ethnicity'<sup>63</sup>. Ethnic identity was further institutionalized in 1932 when the passport system included ethnic 'mark' for every citizen. When in the late 1970's 'modernization' facilitated the creation of the civil society, the national intelligentsia's had all the necessary self-identification to take advantage of the moment and promote their nationalist temper.

Quasi-federalist nature of the Soviet Union also provided grounds for the persistence of self-determination. Although federalism was just a decorative structural distinction during Stalinist years, administrative structures of the political units offered

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<sup>61</sup> Ghia Nodia, "Polytechnic Georgia: Facts, Approaches and Suggestions for the Political Strategy", in *Erti Sazogadoeba, Mravali Etnosi (One Society, Diverse Ethnicity)* (Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development, 2003), 70.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Saroyan, "Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia", in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 400.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

them considerable privileges during the weakened control<sup>64</sup>. Existence of the right of secession on the paper kept the possibility of secession on the future agenda<sup>65</sup>. All this preserved the ambitions of the non-Russian nationalities and protected them from unitary triumphalism.

During Stalin's era federal system also provided institutional basis for the formation of indigenous leaderships. This process was called *Korenizatsiia* or nativization (1921): native officials were involved in the training program for political, cultural and economic self-administration and were equipped with flags, courts, soviets, etc.<sup>66</sup> Education also played a decisive role in forming the national consciousness of the groups: studies were conducted in the native language of the titular population of the political unit; publishing houses were established assisting the spread of books, newspapers, etc.<sup>67</sup> Purpose of these policies was to assure that national minorities would feel 'comfortable' under Russian control, eradicating 'the potential for defensive nationalism'<sup>68</sup>. However, the outcome was the quite the opposite, instead of developing loyalty towards the centre, ethnic communities developed immunity towards Russification and embarked on the projects of national mobilization. Already in the mid

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<sup>64</sup> Introduction to *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in Post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, ed. Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters and Alexei Malashenko (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Raymond Pearson, "The historical background to Soviet federalism", in *Soviet Federalism, Nationalism and Economic Decentralization*, ed. Alastair McAuley (Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Saroyan, "Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia", in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 404.

<sup>67</sup> Corliss Lamont, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), 174. Bruno Coppieters, "Soviet and Post-Soviet Nationality and Regional Policies", in *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in Post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, ed. Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters and Alexei Malashenko (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 33.

1930's Stalin realized that nativization would hinder successful incorporation of people in the project of socialism and returned to harsher politics.<sup>69</sup>

After Stalin's death, 'the combination of korenizatsiia and national territorialization, with enhanced modernization linked with cultural identity, gave national groups more incentives for national political activity and continued ethnic mobilization'<sup>70</sup>. National elites evolved into national 'mafias' that controlled the affairs of the republics with little regard for Moscow. 'Extensive networks of patronage and corruption'<sup>71</sup> during Brezhnev era and the flourishing underground arts assisted the spread dissident ideas. Stalinist restrictions on ethnic expression were also reasonably modified. Thus, by 1970's the titular nationality had already been favored through the administrative reforms; self-consciousness, on the other hand, was formulated by the educational and language policies resulting in the perception of the administrative borders as the real 'markers of national identity'<sup>72</sup>.

'Nationalization' did not only refer back to already existent ethnic traditions, but also introduced institutional innovations of the Soviet state-formation. During this process the 'hegemony of the titular nationality was reproduced in all spheres of cultural practice, from publishing of books, periodicals and newspapers to the activities of theater

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union Collapse? (Understanding Historical Change)* (London: M.E. Sharpe, inc., 1998), 72, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Julie A Lynn George, "Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia", (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 78.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Strayer, *Why did the Soviet Union Collapse? (Understanding Historical Change)* (London: M.E. Sharpe, inc., 1998), 75.

<sup>72</sup> Bruno Coppieters, "Soviet and Post-Soviet Nationality and Regional Policies", in *Conflicting Loyalties and the State in Post-Soviet Russia and Eurasia*, ed. Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters and Alexei Malashenko (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1998), 25.

and folkloric song and dance ensembles'<sup>73</sup>. In Transcaucasia especially, the period of 'indirect rule' from Moscow 'was used by local party elites to extend favoritism toward the titular nationality'<sup>74</sup>. In spite of partiality towards the titular nation, it is generally believed that the initial Leninist policies of ethnic particularism benefited the ethnic entities or at least allowed them 'to survive in an atmosphere that would have otherwise led to their total assimilation and disappearance'<sup>75</sup>. The created situation had double effect, on the one hand the nationalities in the autonomous regions were reminded of their traditions and unique values through some kind of cultural freedom, and on the other hand they were repressed by the titular nations and the centre. This dual influence resulted in the formulation of national ideologies in which the titular nation was incorporated as the 'culprit'.

In Abkhazia, despite Moscow's unwillingness to fulfill demands for independence or broader autonomy, alliance existed between Russian and Abkhazian elites, especially in the last decades of the Soviet Union. This support from the centre largely contributed to the creation of an 'ethnic machine' granting Abkhazian elites enough power and influence to generate their own plans.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Saroyan, "Beyond the Nation-State: Culture and Ethnic Politics in Soviet Transcaucasia", in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 406.

<sup>74</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "On the Road to Independence: Cultural Cohesion and Ethnic Revival in a Multinational Society", in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 378.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 34.

<sup>76</sup> Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajara before and since the Soviet Collapse", in *The Myth of "Ethnic Conflict": Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford (Center for Strategic and International Studies Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2001), 263.

Cultural promotion for Abkhazia reached its zenith in the late 1970's, when the demands of secession were alleviated by considerable increase of autonomy. By 1988 Abkhazia had been granted decent 'resources' necessary for the development of nationalist agendas.

At this stage of ethnic mobilization, Gorbachev entered the scene. General circumstances (economic downfall, weakening of the socialist ideology, international pressure) and his reckless policies of dismantling the party power offered an unprecedented opportunity to both, autonomous regions and Union Republics, to claim their rights on independence.

### ***3.2. Reigning National Spirit of the 1990's***

The conflict is well contextualized within the 'historical legacy' of the Soviet Union. However, Soviet policies towards nationalities cannot serve as the only justification for the warfare between Abkhazia and Georgia. The ethno-nationalist Georgian independence movement played a significant role in polarizing the minorities.

Political chaos of 1980's was the birthplace for the plans of national independence. In Georgia, a very peculiar political spirit started to take lead. Communist era suppressed the elements of civic consciousness shaped during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Faced with the possibility of independence in 1990, Georgians turned towards the pre-democratic idea of political behavior since no tradition of democratic consciousness was available. The heroic 'irreconcilable' stance attracted much stronger

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Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 57.

appeal then the search for specific political means for achieving practical ends.

Nationalist discourse gained an upper hand over political sobriety and tolerance, while the revolutionary radicalism employed the image of the enemy as the cornerstone for the revival of the nation<sup>77</sup>.

In the search for the ‘invisible enemy’, familiar Bolshevik ideology was strongly echoed. In case of Georgia it was Kremlin that acquired the status of omnipresent provocateur. Trapped in the search for the evil, Georgian leadership deemed the ethnic disorders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the machinations from Moscow, and handled them with more radical anti-Russian and pro-independence actions<sup>78</sup>. ‘Politicization of the ethnic conflict’<sup>79</sup> was a response to Russia’s ‘efforts’ to deteriorate Georgian-Abkhazian relations—widening the schism with the separatist regions.<sup>80</sup>

In this atmosphere of ‘Georgians against the others’, Gamsakhurdia’s anti-minority discourse was soon transformed into the populist ideology<sup>81</sup>. Gamsakhurdia was the ‘people’s man’, a charismatic leader with impressive intellectual background and dissident past. Jack Snyder argues that popularity of ethnic leader is a general tendency

<sup>77</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 76.

<sup>78</sup> Giorgi Zhorzholiani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 78.

Georgi M. Derluguian, “The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajara before and since the Soviet Collapse”, in *The Myth of “Ethnic Conflict”: Politics, Economics, and “Cultural” Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford (Center for Strategic and International Studies Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2001), 285.

<sup>80</sup> Malkhaz Kakabadze, “Peaceful Caucasus—Myth or Reality”, in *Yuzhni’ Kavkaz—Nestabilnii’ Region Zamorozhennih Konfliktov (South Caucasus—Unstable Region of Frozen Conflicts)*, ed. Wienfried Schneider Deters (Tbilisi: Friedrich Eberto Stiftung, 2001), 66.

Ioseb Archvadze, *Tu Dagivitsko Apkhazeto (I won’t forget you Abkhazia)* (Tbilisi, 2004), 24.

<sup>81</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia”, in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), 79.

during unstable political situation. Vulnerability of public opinion to the influence during the state change brings about the support of ethnic discourse. Since national message has power to unite citizens around the common cause, ethnic leaders use the nationalistic message to consolidate their positions.<sup>82</sup>

The danger of losing Abkhazia and Ossetia provided sufficient grounds for the population to rally for the ‘united’ Georgia. In addition to this, April 9 tragedy provided ‘psychotic situation in the society’—emergent fear was exploited by Gamsakhurdia.<sup>83</sup> Supremacy of the Georgians was strongly emphasized—Georgians as the ‘titular nation’ were portrayed as legitimate leaders of the minorities<sup>84</sup>. Chauvinistic slogans of the leadership were transmitted to media. Minorities were being described as the ‘guests on our soil’, who had to be grateful to live in Georgia<sup>85</sup>.

Given the already existent separatist ambitions in Abkhazia in the late 1980’s, Gamsakhurdia’s policies were identified as yet another expression of Georgian imperialism. As I already mentioned, the ‘Matryoshka-style’ structure of the Soviet Union and the loosened control of the last decades provided favorable conditions for the autonomous regions to put their independence agendas into the action. While legally part of Georgia, by the late 1970’s Abkhazia enjoyed unique privileges ranging from its own parliament with more than half seats reserved for non-Georgians to its own police force

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<sup>82</sup> Julie Allyn George, “Separatism or Federalism? Ethnic Conflict and Resolution in Russia and Georgia”, (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin 2005), 40.

<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 61.

<sup>84</sup> Bruno Coppieters, *Federalism and Conflict in the Caucasus* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 22.

<sup>85</sup> Ghia Nodia, “Democratization in Georgia: at a Dead-End or a Crossroads?”, *Pomegranate* (2003), 34.

where virtually no-one was Georgian. Gamsakhurdia's famous slogan '*Georgia First!*' was perceived as the call for mobilization<sup>86</sup>.

In the late 1980's Abkhazia based its demands for independence on the political rights of its people. If Georgia could break away from the Soviet Union and 'reclaim its heritage as an independent state that had been lost to the Bolsheviks in 1921', why couldn't Abkhazia appeal for the independence lost first to Tsarist Russia and then to the Soviet Union and specifically Georgian SSR.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, the national movements of Abkhazia and Georgia were inherently conflictuous. Georgians vigorously asserted the indivisibility of the two units, while Abkhazians claimed that 'their autonomy was not only ethnically distinct from the rest of Georgia but also enjoyed a full and equal right to self-determination'<sup>88</sup>. Ideological incompatibility produced the need for the substantiation of the individual positions of each side. Political propaganda was not sufficient for raising the awareness about the 'true rationale' behind the conflict. The divergence was automatically transmitted to the intellectual sphere starting already in the early 1980's. In both cases, history, identity and ethnicity were repeatedly incorporated in the discourse either consciously or unconsciously for promoting the righteousness of ideological beliefs.

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Georgia Diary—A Chronicle of War and Political Chaos in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Aves, *Paths to National Independence in Georgia, 1987-1990* (London: University of London, 1991), 19.

## Chapter 4: Two Faces of the Same Coin: Abkhazian and Georgian Historiography

The effects of the popular historiography on the minds of the schoolchildren can be considered undoubted. Judging from my personal experience, I can boldly say that Georgian history books have been successful in formulating nationalist ideology in which Abkhazia represented yet another integral part of Georgia and Abkhazians were one of the peoples of Georgia.

In order to avoid any kind of confusion about the fact that Abkhazians and Georgians are indeed different groups, a short overview of the origin of the Abkhazian people has to be offered. It is generally acknowledged that Abkhazians represent a different ethnic group than Georgian; however, there is a considerable ambiguity about the exact origin of the group. Most widespread assumption is that Abkhazians are the descendants of the Abasgoi living on the territory of Abkhazia. Abkhazian historiography, on the other hand, lists several tribes, the unification of which produced today's Abkhazians.

As for the language, Abkhazian belongs to the North-Western Caucasus Language<sup>89</sup>, which is distinct from the Kartvelian Languages. Georgian, along with its regional languages can be classified as Kartvelian<sup>90</sup>.

Given the differences in the ethnic consistence and the linguistic traditions, it might be hard to believe that there is contention about the 'Georgianness' of Abkhazia.

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<sup>89</sup> Voronov, *Abkhazi—Kto Oni (Abkhazian—Who Are They?)* (Gagra, 1993), 4.

<sup>90</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 13.

However, the dispute over the place of Abkhazia has been ongoing starting from the nineteenth century and culminating with the military confrontation of 1990's. Georgian intellectuals have are trying to overlook the ethnic disparity with Abkhazians, mostly stressing shared culture, traditions and past. Abkhazian textbooks, on the other hand, are built around the idea that Abkhazia is a completely unique region with its separate inheritance.

Simply speaking, Georgian and Abkhazian historiography depart on two levels. On the one hand there is an apparent dispute over the territory of Abkhazia, in which the legacy of the region is the apple of contention for the both sides. If Abkhazian side argues that the territory of present Abkhazia is the ancient homeland of the Abkhazian people, Georgian history portrays the same region as inseparable part of Georgia and does not even consider it necessary to specify it as Abkhazia, but rather as a component of Western Georgia. Clearly this divergence in the perception of the region results in the distinct models of historiography—where the same place is spoken of as Georgia and Abkhazia at the same time.

On the other hand, conflict is evident in the very pattern of history-reading. The same events are ascribed different significance and meaning. According to the general trend, Abkhazian individuality is strongly suppressed in Georgia, while in case of Abkhazia connection and influence of Georgia is almost omitted.

The two historical narratives differ in terms of style of writing as well. One unifying factor is the ethnogenetic approach to historiography. Scholars from both sides adopt essentialist view, giving categorical statements about the consistence and heritage

of the rigidly defined nation. This kind of approach has ‘led to the situation where definitive answers [are] given to complicated scientific problems without any firm evidence’<sup>91</sup>. However, it seems that Abkhazian textbook puts much more effort in substantiating its argument by archeological evidence. This might be the outcome of the fact that Abkhazian official historiography in its today’s form has been developed comparatively later than Georgian narrative, which has its roots in the end of the nineteenth century. Georgian textbooks, on the other hand, offer little support to their categorical statements.

Another interesting aspect of Abkhazian historiography is the categorical denial of the affinity with the Georgian past and strong emphasis on the connection with other, mostly Western, civilizations. It is claimed that Abkhazians have borrowed little from ‘all the peoples in the world’: Greek, Romans, French, English, North-Caucasian Peoples, Germans, Armenians, Mongols, Turks and Russians.<sup>92</sup>

The following chapter will mostly concentrate on the second aspect of historiography—the history reading. Territorial dispute will be omitted since the way in which it is performed is repetitive throughout the textbooks. Abkhazian territory is continually mentioned as part of Georgia in the Georgian textbooks, while the Abkhazian textbooks reject association with Georgia and Georgian culture in general. The controversy involves historical sites as well. For example, Abkhazians take pride in the

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<sup>91</sup> Bruno Coppieters, “In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict”, in *Secession, History and the Social Science*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune (VUB Brussels University Press, 2002), 105.

<sup>92</sup> Voronov, *Abkhazi—Kto Oni (Abkhazian—Who Are They?)*, 17-18.

world's ancient cave community of Apiancha, and the settlement of Kistrick<sup>93</sup>. At the same time, both historical sites are listed among the ancient Neolithic heritage of Georgia<sup>94</sup>. This and other examples of territorial disagreement are abundant, thus I am not going to go through them. Instead, I will try to chronologically present the history of Abkhazia and the major disputes over its interpretation as revealed in the Georgian and Abkhazian textbooks.

#### **4.1. Origin of the Abkhazian People and the First Political Communities**

The allegedly first ancient Georgian Kingdom was Colchis existing from the sixth to the first centuries B.C. Colchis is believed to have occupied the region of Abkhazia and present-day Georgian provinces of Mingrelia, Imereti, Guria, Adjara, Svaneti, Racha, as well as parts of Turkey. Modern anthropologists as well as Georgian textbooks suggest that the territory was mostly settled by the Kartvelian tribes (Laz-Mingrealians), however there were numerous other tribes inhabiting the area. Colchis was a unified country with one King as a ruler. Georgian historians consider Colchis as the first Georgian entity, with Abkhazia being natural part of it.<sup>95</sup>

Abkhazian textbook rebuffs this implication, suggesting that ancient Abkhazians united in the tribe alliance of Heniokh (different from Laz-Mingrelian—Georgian tribe), represented a separate ‘Abkhazian’ version of Colchis culture. Moreover, the presence of Georgian tribes on the central territory of Colchis is highly doubted, maintaining that they

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<sup>93</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 23.

<sup>94</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 13.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 39.

lived on the Southern part of the Kingdom, on the territory of the present-day Turkey and only moved to the North after the fifth century.<sup>96</sup> This assertion attempts not only to nullify the claims that ancient Georgia included Abkhazia, but also suggests that Georgians did not significantly participate in the building of the ancient civilization of Colchis and especially the cities of Dioskuria (Sokhumi) and Phasis (Poti). Considering that Phasis and Dioskuria represent the oldest cradles of civilization in the region, it is understandable that the rights over the cities are the subject of row.

The Kingdom of Colchis ceased existence in the first century B.C. Heniokh alliance, Abkhazians being part of it, became quite powerful at this period until it fell apart in the first centuries of our era, leaving behind several proto-Abkhazian tribes: Apsilae (Apsilians)<sup>97</sup>, Abazinians and San(n)igs<sup>98</sup>. Starting from the first century, these tribes have had their princes and kings and some kind of political organization.<sup>99</sup> The connection of these tribes with the present-day Abkhazians is also advocated by the foreign experts on Georgian history, William Edward David Allen and David Marshall Lang. Both believe that Apsilia and Abasgia are the Greek names for Abkhazia, both used in the ancient sources.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 61.

<sup>97</sup> In the sixth century Missimians broke of from Apsilae.

<sup>98</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 13.

<sup>99</sup> Giorgi Zhorzholiani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 6.

<sup>100</sup> William Edward David Allen, *A History of the Georgian People—From the Beginning down to the Russian Conquest in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Barnes&Noble, Inc., 1971).  
David Marshall Lang, *A Modern History of Soviet Georgia* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1962).

According to Abkhazian sources the abovementioned tribes occupied the territory above the river Ingur, thus the present ethno-political border with the Georgians is claimed to have been established already at that time.

Georgian chronicles only superficially mention some of the Abkhazian tribes, not explaining their significance in the formation of the Abkhazian nation. As a result, the origin of Abkhazian people as such, is left out from the Georgian historiography, making it possible to assume that Abkhazians are ethnically connected to Georgians since ‘they were living on the territory of the country’.

In the fourth century another powerful Kingdom emerges in the Eastern coast of the black sea under the name of Lazika (Egrisi). Lazs are believed to be the ancestors of present-day Georgians. Formally, Lazika was subordinated to the Roman Empire, however it was granted independence in the domestic governance<sup>101</sup>. According to the Georgian textbooks, already in the fourth century Lazika conquered the Abazinians, Apsilians and Sanigs (Abkhazians tribes) and consolidated its power over the whole region. This again establishes the century-long tradition of Abkhazians being part of the Georgian territory.

The conquest of the ancient Abkhazian tribes by the Lazs is not mentioned in the Abkhazian textbook, however it is noted that Apsilia and Abazgia were vassal states to Lazika<sup>102</sup>, which most probably provided military assistance to the provinces.<sup>103</sup> Thus,

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<sup>101</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 35.

Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 49.

<sup>102</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 94.

some kind of political collaboration can be claimed to have existed between the Abkhazian and Georgian peoples during this period.

Starting from the sixth century Lazika weakened and eventually was abolished in the seventh century.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, hereditary power emerged in Abasgia and Apsilia. This authority would become the basis for the emergence of the ‘Abkhazian Kingdom’.

#### **4.2. Kingdom of Abkhazia and Georgia**

Historians from both sides agree upon the creation of Abkhazian Kingdom in the second part of the eighth century, the power of which spread to the whole Western Georgia under the king Leon II. Later in the ninth century the authority of Abkhazian Kings was also extended to Eastern Georgia. The capital of the Kingdom was Kutaisi (present Georgia) and it was divided into principalities. Georgians view this period as the beginning of the unification of the country, emphasizing the religious subordination of the Western Georgian episcopate to Eastern Georgian (Mtskheta) Patriarch.<sup>105</sup>

It is mutually consented that exactly during this time (eighth century) Abazgo-Apsilian ethnic element started to spread to the Georgian part as a result of intermarriage and cultural interaction.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 44.

Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 59.

<sup>104</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 48.

Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 67.

<sup>105</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 76.

<sup>106</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 124.

The last king of Abkhazian Kingdom Theodos was removed from the throne in 978, leaving behind no heir. Sister of Theodos was married to the son of the King of Kartli (Eastern Georgia). It was decided to put their son Bagrat III on the throne of the united Kingdom of Abkhazia and Kartli. Bagrat III inherited the throne from both Kartvelian and Abkhazian sides.<sup>107</sup>

This period marks the first official unification of Abkhazian and Georgian lands. Exactly during this time did a great deal of cultural intermixing take place. Georgian churches were built on the Abkhazian territory, Georgian language spread among the higher layers of the society.<sup>108</sup>

The era from Bagrat III until the dissolution of the Kingdom of Abkhazians and Kartvelians is considered to be the Golden Age in Georgian historiography and one of the main reference points in the nationalist discourse.<sup>109</sup> ‘United Georgia’ became the focal column for myth-building during the national revival of the 1990. Since Abkhazia and Georgia were ‘one’ at this time, the idea of cohesive Georgia incorporates Abkhazia as its integral part.

The Kingdom of Abkhazians and Georgians declined in the thirteenth century due to the invasions by the Turks and Mongols. The territory became divided into small kingdoms and principalities with their own rulers that enjoyed considerable autonomy.

<sup>107</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 65.

Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 81.

Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 126.

<sup>108</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 152.

<sup>109</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the seventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 91.

There was almost no difference between the princes and the King, the princes could wage a war, establish peace and form judiciary systems.<sup>110</sup> Abkhazian textbook greatly emphasizes the significance of the Abkhazian principality of this period, which had necessary political power to engage in self-governance.

The Kingdom of Abkhazians and Georgians officially disintegrated in 1490 into four Kingdoms: Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti and Samtskhe. Abkhazia was part of Imereti Kingdom.<sup>111</sup>

Since then and until the seventeenth century Abkhazia was subordinated to Mingrelia, another region of Georgia which was also part of the Imereti Kingdom<sup>112</sup>. Since Mingrelia was and is part of Georgia, Georgians interpret this period as the continuation of the Abkhazian belonging to Georgia. Although this was officially true, northern part of Abkhazia remained more or less independent, while the rest of the territory enjoyed broad autonomy.

### **4.3. Principality of Abkhazia under Russian Authority**

In the seventeenth century Abkhazian Shervashidze dynasty gained power in the region. According to Abkhazian sources, this was the period when Abkhazia regained

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<sup>110</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istorია (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eighth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 35.

<sup>111</sup> Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istorია (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 141.

<sup>112</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 162.

independence. However, Georgian chronicles just mention the authority of Abkhazian dynasty that spread to some parts of Mingrealia<sup>113</sup>.

According to Abkhazians, this is also the period when the ethnic border between the Kartvelians and Abkhazians was restored and remained more or less the same for the next 300 years.<sup>114</sup>

Eastern Georgian Kingdom was abolished by Russia in 1801. Meanwhile, in Abkhazia the sovereign prince Keleshbey Chachba led an independent state-policy skillfully maneuvering between the interests of Russia and Turkey<sup>115</sup>. Abkhazia formally remained Turkish protectorate, however, sensing the rising Russian influence in the region Keleshbey started to take steps towards the cooperation with Russia.

Neighboring Mingrelia entered Russian protection in 1803. The region was commanded by Nina Dadiani. Abkhazian sources argue that Nina, who was explicitly pro-Russian, was determined to get rid of Keleshbey and institute her authority through appointing her puppet, the son of Keleshbey—Seferbey (arguably an illegitimate heir). Doubting the sincerity of Keleshbey, Russia in collaboration with Nina Dadiani decided to eliminate him. The death of Keleshbey was blamed on his second son, the legitimate heir to the throne, Aslanbey. Instead, Seferbey was appointed as the ruler of Abkhazia.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2003), 88, 166.

Merab Vachnadze, Vakhtang Guruli and Mikheil Bakhtadze, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the tenth grade*. (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2002), 181.

<sup>114</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 168.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-199.

Abkhazian textbook emphasized the machinations of Nina Dadiani, suggesting that she, along with her priest, pressured Seferbey to ask for the assistance and protection from Russia on 17 February 1810. It is claimed that Nina was operating according to her own interests perfectly understanding strategic importance of Abkhazia.

Legitimacy of Seferbey is also strongly refuted—it is argued that he had no authority over Abkhazia, which in reality was ruled by his brother Aslanbey. Even after gaining control over the territory with Russian assistance, he could not acquire any support from the population that considered Aslanbey the lawful leader.<sup>117</sup> This way the subordination of Abkhazia to Russia is explained through the story of betrayal and unfairness. Contribution of Georgia in limiting the self-governance of Abkhazia is highly stressed, establishing the traditional role of Georgia as the suppressor of Abkhazian independence.

Georgian textbook offers a different story about the same event. Here, Aslanbey is presented as pro-Turkish, murdering his pro-Russian father. No mention is made of the interest of Georgia in the matter. However, the disapproval of the person of Seferbey by the population is revealed. One important detail is that Georgian sources suggest that Abkhazia went under the protection of Russia not separately, but as part of the Kingdom of Imereti. Thus, the independence of Abkhazia before the unification with Russia is strongly rejected, asserting that it was part of Georgia and entered Russia remaining such. Same suggestion is made by David Marshall Lang, who states that Abkhazia was one of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 203.

the principalities of Georgia when incorporated in Russia in 1864 as a result of the Crimean War<sup>118</sup>.

Starting from the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, Russians settle Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians and Estonians in the Abkhazian territory. At the same time, thousands of Muslim Abkhazians were forced to leave for Turkey—an incident called Muhajirism<sup>119</sup>. However, Abkhazian textbook suggest that the most virulent attempts to weaken Abkhazian element in the region were made by the Georgians. ‘Georgianization’ is portrayed as a deliberate campaign initiated in the late 1860’s by the leading Georgian intellectuals who called for the settlement of the territories abandoned by the Mohajirs. Abkhazians believe that exactly during this period Georgian imperial consciousness was formulated—promoting the image of the Georgians as the legitimate leaders of the Caucasus.<sup>120</sup>

Georgians, however, have a completely different perspective on the matter. The movement initiated in 1860’s is known as the fight for the unification and strengthening of Georgia, aimed at eliminating Russian influence in the region<sup>121</sup>. Georgian intellectuals, thus, are presented as the redeemers of Abkhazia going against the Russian colonization.

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<sup>118</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori’a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei’* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 219.

David Marshall Lang, *A Modern History of Soviet Georgia* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1962), 52. Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 6,8,40.

<sup>119</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori’a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei’* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 239.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>121</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli. *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade*. 3<sup>d</sup> ed. (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 70.

As a result of the outside pressure first from Russians and then from Georgians, Abkhazian national consciousness is starting to be formulated in the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>122</sup>

#### **4.4. Status of Abkhazia in the Independent Georgia 1917-1921**

The period from 1917 until the establishment of the Soviet regime in the region is of utmost importance for both Georgia and Abkhazia. Abkhazia considers these years as the proof of the unlawful Georgian occupation, while Georgia sees it as the era of national independence.

With the disintegration of the Russian empire, national councils emerge both in Abkhazia and Georgia. However, Abkhazian People's Council (ANS) is created as part of the Union of United Mountainous People (8 November, 1917). A little later National Council of Georgia is also set up (NSG). The two administrative units established first contacts on 9 February 1918 in Tbilisi, when the indivisibility of Abkhazia was acknowledged<sup>123</sup>.

On 8 April 1918 Bolsheviks entered Abkhazia. Abkhazia asked the Georgian Mensheviks for assistance, who defeated the Red Army on 17 May.<sup>124</sup> Abkhazian textbook suggest that Georgian Mensheviks engaged in robbery and pillage in the territory of Abkhazia. They also revived the ANS with half of the representatives being pro-Georgian.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 271-271.

<sup>124</sup> Giorgi Zhorzholiani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 22.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 274-275.

On 11 May 1918 North Caucasian Republic was declared. It was composed of Daghestan, Checheno-Ingushetia, Ossetia, Karachay-Balkaria, Abkhazia, Kabardia and Adyghea<sup>126</sup>. Abkhazian textbook proposes that the sovereignty of Abkhazia was revived on this date. However, this statement is not convincing since Abkhazia became part of larger entity rather than independent.

Meanwhile, Georgia stays united in the Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic consisting also of Azerbaijan and Armenia. In the spring 1918, Turkey demanded relinquishment of the territories promised under the Brest-Litovsk agreement. However, Transcaucasian Republic maintained that it would not comply with the terms of the agreement, since the independence of the Republic was not acknowledged by Russia, Turkey and Germany by the time it was signed. Experiencing pressure from Turkey and Germany, the Republic was disbanded on 16 May 1918<sup>127</sup>. The same day the Democratic Republic of Georgia is formed. Abkhazians claim that Abkhazia remained part of the Mountain Republic during this period. Georgian textbook, on the other hand, suggests that Sokhumi district was one of the administrative entities of the independent Georgia in 1918.<sup>128</sup> This view is largely supported by numerous Georgian historians.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Stanislav Lakoba, "History: 1917-1989", in *The Abkhazians*, ed. George Hewitt (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 90.

<sup>127</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 279.

Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 94.

<sup>128</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 109.

<sup>129</sup> Giorgi Zhorzholiani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 19.

Menteshashvili, *History of Interrelations between the Georgian, the Abkhazia and the Ossetian People* (Tbilisi, 1990), 11-16.

At this point the ambiguous excerpt from the history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations begins. By the time Georgia declares independence, ANS still remains divided into pro-Georgian and pro-Abkhazian camps. According to the Abkhazian textbook, due to this, response to the independence of Georgia was confusing, apparently being influenced by both sides. On the one hand, judicial basis for the previous relations with Georgia was proclaimed null due to the dissolution of Transcaucasian Republic and on the other hand, assistance was requested from the new Georgian political entity for the governmental organization of Abkhazia.<sup>130</sup>

In order to regulate the relations, Abkhazian delegation arrived in Tbilisi. Abkhazian textbook adheres the idea that Abkhazians were ‘deceived’ by the Georgian politicians with the false threat that Turkey was planning to attack Abkhazia. As a result, the delegation, not consulting with ANS, signed an agreement with Georgia on 8 June 1918. The agreement crafted by ANS, on the other hand, was signed on 11 June 1918. Consequently two agreements emerged, one of which granted more rights and concessions to Abkhazia. The document signed on 11 June offered the following terms:

1. The final decision about Georgian-Abkhazian relations had to be approved by ANS.
2. Abkhazian representative had to be present in Georgian government and all the matters connected to Abkhazia had to be agreed with him.
3. ANS had the right of domestic administration.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 282-283.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

According to Abkhazian historiography, confusion about the documents made it possible for Georgia to refer to the ‘desired’ document. Due to this situation, the agreement is considered a forgery, annulling any other treaties signed after this date. Georgian textbook, on the other hand, gives no notice of the vague situation. Moreover, it claims that ANS was granted the rights of the ‘good’ 11 June agreement<sup>132</sup>.

According to the Abkhazian account, following these events, Georgian army under the leadership of general Mazniashvili entered Abkhazia in June 1918 with the pretext of protecting the territory from Bolsheviks and Turkey. This move has been considered as the armed intervention in the sovereignty of the country.<sup>133</sup> Mazniashvili was also appointed as the general-governor of Abkhazia.

ANS, not hiding its indignation over the Georgian politics, was swiftly accused of supporting Turkey and pro-Turkish Abkhazians. Pro-Abkhazian members of the council were arrested. According to the Abkhazians, this was a strategic move from the side of Georgia, aimed at eliminating anti-Georgian elements in ANS in order to dominate the decision-making process.<sup>134</sup>

On 9 October the second ANS again protested against the dissolution of the first meeting. This was answered by dispelling the second meeting as well. Abkhazian historians claim that this was a clear violation of the ‘wide autonomy’ offered to Abkhazia. First of all, ANS, responsible for decision-making, was dispelled two times.

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<sup>132</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade*. (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 111.

<sup>133</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 287.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-293

Secondly, the Abkhazian representative in the Georgian government was removed from his post and his position was abolished.<sup>135</sup>

Georgia of course presents the case in different light. It argues that the military intervention was unavoidable since ANS was not satisfied with the broad autonomy and was determined to achieve independence.<sup>136</sup>

On 27 December 1918 elections were held in Abkhazia. According to the Abkhazian textbook, Georgians made changes to the election laws allowing the election of Georgian deputies with the objective of monopolizing the decision-making. Georgian side claims that the elections were democratic. The ‘fairly’ elected council approved the status of Abkhazia as an autonomous region of Georgia. The document was endorsed by the 1921 constitution of Georgia. Whatever the reality, from the elected 40 deputies, 27 were Georgian, clearly allowing the dominance of the Georgian interests.<sup>137</sup>

According to the Abkhazian textbook, the act about autonomy was ornamental in nature, illustrated by the oversimplified terms of agreement which consisted only of two clauses:

1. Abkhazia was becoming an autonomous part of Georgia.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>136</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 111.

<sup>137</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 304-305. Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade*. (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 111.

2. For drafting the constitution and regulating the relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia, a mixed committee would be elected consisting of equal number of Georgian and Abkhazian representatives.<sup>138</sup>

Abkhazian textbook emphasizes the involuntary nature of the autonomy and argues that due to this and other violations, Abkhazia was not legally an autonomous part of Georgia during its independence.

#### **4.5. The Soviet Era**

Abkhazia became separate Soviet Socialist republic on 4 March 1921<sup>139</sup>. 45 days later the declaration of separate Abkhazian SSR was annulled under the initiative of Stalin. Suggestion was made to include Abkhazia within the administration of Georgian SSR as an autonomous region. However, this decision was enforced only on 19 February 1931. In between these dates Abkhazia remained a Socialist Republic in association with Georgia, which subordinated it to Georgia but also allowed it to retain considerable self-governance, broader than autonomy. According to 1922 constitution of Georgian SSR, Abkhazia is mentioned as ‘contractual’ Republic. Georgians emphasize that Abkhazia in fact became autonomous entity within Georgia in 1921, while Abkhazian side believes that the standing of both political units was equal as revealed in the 1927 constitution of Georgian SSR and 1925 Constitution of Abkhazia. In the former, federative nature of

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<sup>138</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori’a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei’* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 309.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

Georgia is revealed, while the latter excludes the possibility of autonomous status of Abkhazia since at that point autonomous units did not have constitutions.<sup>140</sup>

In 1931 the status of Abkhazia changes to that of autonomous republic within Georgia. According to the Abkhazian sources the head of the Abkhazian government Nestor Lakoba was against collectivization in the region. Stalin would allow the refusal of collectivization only if Abkhazia would become autonomous part of Georgia. Lakoba had ‘no other choice but to accept these terms’ and thus on 19 February 1931 Abkhazia became an autonomous part of Georgia.<sup>141</sup>

Political status of Abkhazia and Georgia in the period between 1921 and 1931 played a considerable role in the myth-building projects during the national mobilization. The provision of autonomy in 1931 increased the likelihood of the conflict. This was due to several reasons: first of all, collective identity of the region was strongly strengthened since 1921 and secondly, separation from the central state became more viable due to already existent state-like institutions<sup>142</sup>. The memory of the independence in 1921 was preserved until 1980’s, breaking free during the Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation.

From the perspective of Georgia, the socialist period had an equally significant impact. Incorporation of Abkhazia as an autonomous part of Georgia in 1931, established the modern tradition of Abkhazia being part of Georgia, which the country was not willing to give up after the dissolution of the union.

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<sup>140</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori’a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei’* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 319-320. Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 125.

<sup>141</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori’a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei’* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 321-322.

<sup>142</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Autonomy and Conflict” (PhD diss., Uppsala University 2002).

Ronald Gregory Suny ascribes the formation of Georgian national identity to modernity, and namely to the Soviet era. If we agree with this claim, it can be argued that new Georgian identity was formulated in such a way that it incorporated the idea of Abkhazia being part of Georgia. With the dissolution of the union, Abkhazia demanded the change of the Georgian self-perception, which was met with great resistance.

#### **4.6. Spirit of the National Revival**

Abkhazian as well as foreign historians believe that after 1931 period of Georgianization started in Abkhazia, which lasted until the death of Stalin and Beria. However, after 1953 Abkhazians are slowly granted more cultural freedom: the closed down Abkhazian schools were re-opened, department of Abkhazian language and literature was created in Sukhumi Institute, Abkhazian sector of Philology was initiated, Ministry of Culture and Sukhumi Philharmonic Hall opened. In 1954 Abkhazian alphabet is changed from Georgian to Russian. All this contributed to the formation of Abkhazian self-perception as a separate entity in the second part of the twentieth century.

Abkhazians continuously expressed their discontent in the mass protests of 1957, 1965, 1967, and 1978.<sup>143</sup> However, the major dissatisfaction of Abkhazians came to light on the Lykhny meeting on 18 March 1989, when 30 000 Abkhazians demanded the re-assessment of Abkhazian status by restoration of the Abkhazian SSR existent from 1921 to 1931. Lykhny declaration did not receive any attention.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 337,347.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 348.

Georgian textbook views the Lykhny letter as an anti-Georgian move from the Abkhazian side. As a result, Georgian citizens started to protest in front of the Government building on 4 April 1989 in Tbilisi. Protestors demanded the abolition of Abkhazian autonomy. Discontent soon transformed into the calls for the independence of Georgia. The protests were violently dispersed on 9 April 1989 by the Soviet troops.<sup>145</sup>

After the events of 9 April, Georgia strengthened its national movement claiming the right of independence based on the unlawful occupation of Georgia by the Soviet Union in 1921. Independence of Georgia was proclaimed on 26 May 1991. According to this decision, the constitution of 1978, as well as that of 1921 became void since Georgia did not recognize this period as legal. Abkhazian side asserts that since Georgian SSR was deemed unlawful, then Abkhazian ASSR could not exist within its borders. Thus, the restoration of the Abkhazian Supreme Council in 23 July 1992 did not go against the agreement.<sup>146</sup> Georgians of course rejected this supposition.

Abkhazian textbook suggest that on 14 August 1992 Georgian military forces entered Abkhazia under the excuse of defending the railway. On August 15 ceasefire agreement was reached, according to which both sides had to retrieve their militaries. However, on 18 August Georgian forces re-occupied Sokhumi.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 168.

<sup>146</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 352-353.  
Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 169.

<sup>147</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei' (History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present)* (Sokhumi, 2007), 352,354.

Georgia offers a different story: according to it, Abkhazians took advantage of the political turmoil in Georgia and with the support of Russia started preparing the plan of secession. Individuals were kidnapped and trains robbed<sup>148</sup>. In August 1992 the Georgian State Council took the decision to enter Abkhazia with the objective of defending the transport routes. Georgians assert that due to the weak organization of Georgian governmental structures at the time, poorly organized and equipped army was caught up in the military provocations and engaged in warfare. The disorganized and undisciplined troops are also held responsible for operating without the orders of their superiors, a good example of which is the occupation of Sokhumi. If we reflect on this ‘excuses’, it can be assumed that Georgia recognizes its blame for the engagement in the war. Nevertheless, it is claimed that the main aim of the Georgian side was to sustain peace in the region.<sup>149</sup>

In order to substantiate Georgian rightfulness in the warfare, Georgian textbook suggest that Abkhazians were guilty of violating the agreements of ceasefire: September 1993 (Moscow) and July 1993 (Sochi). On the other hand, international scholars as well as Abkhazian historians claim that both agreements were disregarded by the Georgian side (See chapter 2). Only after these infringements, did Abkhazians devise an operation to free Sokhumi and defeat the opponent. Georgian army was overpowered on 30

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<sup>148</sup> It is not indicated who was responsible for kidnapping the political figures in the region. However, it is generally acknowledged that the above-mentioned acts can be ascribed to the supporters of Gamsakhurdia rather than to Abkhazians.

<sup>149</sup> Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 176.

September 1993. On 26 November 1994 Abkhazian parliament ratified new constitution proclaiming Abkhazia as a sovereign state.<sup>150</sup>

Present political situation is not discussed in any of the textbooks. Georgian textbooks try to completely avoid engagement in the matters connected to present-day relations with Abkhazia. Abkhazian textbook only emphasizes the aggressive politics of Georgia as the main hindrance to the negotiations<sup>151</sup>.

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<sup>150</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 56-358.

Merab Vachnadze and Vakhtang Guruli, *Sakartvelos Istoria (History of Georgia) Textbook for the eleventh grade* (Tbilisi: Artanudji, 2004), 177.

<sup>151</sup> Oleg Bgazhba, and Stanislav Lakoba, *Istori'a Abkhazii—S Drevneishih Vermjen do Nashih Dnei'* (*History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present*) (Sokhumi, 2007), 373.

## Chapter 5: Developing the 'Traditions' of Historical Narrative

As already mentioned in the second chapter, the relations between Georgia and Abkhazia deteriorated already after 1918 and mostly in 1930's during the 'Georgianization' campaign conducted by Beria. Conflicting interests in the scholarly field broke free after Stalin's death, when Georgian intellectuals started to promote chauvinistic messages concerning the minorities. Starting from the 1950's the tradition of historical instrumentalization is established by both sides, but especially by Georgia.

Some scholars argue that the ethnocentric consciousness among the Georgians was formulated already in the end of the nineteenth century. 'Superior' approach to the minorities is explained by the 'defensive mechanism' developed as a result of external aggression<sup>152</sup>. This approach, in part, caused the indignation of minorities, especially when promoted in the scholarly literature in the 1950's.

In 1954, Pavle Ingoroqva, a Georgian literary historian, published a book explaining the origins of Abkhazian people. He ardently denied that Abkhazians were indigenous to the region and argued that they had occupied the territory only for the past three centuries. Instead, Georgians were claimed to be the ancestors of the 'Abkhazians' known from the historical sources<sup>153</sup>.

This argument was promptly assumed by other Georgian scholars, resulting in massive protests in Abkhazia in 1956. Abkhazians realized that Ingoroqva's thesis

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<sup>152</sup> Gaga Nizharadze, in *Erti Sazogadoeba, Mravali Etnosi (One Society, Diverse Ethnicity)* (Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development, 2003), 34-35.

<sup>153</sup> Bruno Coppieters, "In Defense of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict", in *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune (VUB Brussels University Press, 2002), 93.

provided legitimacy for the Georgian colonization of Abkhazia and might have served as a pretext for the repression of Abkhazians in the region. Due to the danger of inciting political conflict, Ingoroqva's book was censored by Moscow.<sup>154</sup>

However, Ingoroqva's thesis did not completely disappear. Around ten years after its first appearance, Berdzenishvili published a similar work. This time, the 'research' was highly praised in the Communist Party newspaper (1967). This act caused another chain of protests among the Abkhazian students and intellectuals. Their objections fell on deaf ears—around three dozens of other scholars echoed Ingoroqva's ideas.

On 1976 party congress, Eduard Shevardnadze tried to constrain educational and cultural inequalities between the ethnic communities. However, these minor attempts were not enough to prevent the budding secessionist ideology in Abkhazia.<sup>155</sup>

The refusal to grant an equal status to minority languages and the denial of the right of secession in the 1978 constitution were perceived as the last infringements on their cultural rights by the Abkhazians. Consequent concessions did not improve the situation.

As illustrated above, academic traditions played a significant role in the confrontation. Cultural programs also figured significantly in the policies of Georgia to Abkhazia: in 1989 state program was launched to make the Georgian language compulsory in every region, branch of Georgian university was opened in Sukhumi. Abkhazians perceived this moves as yet other assaults on their individuality<sup>156</sup>.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 98.

In the late 1980's history was greatly politicized. Ingoroqva's ideas, as well as the events of 1918-1921 gained great prominence. However, it cannot be argued that history was voluntarily instrumentalized. The scholars on both sides strongly believed in the assumptions they were supporting. One aspect remains undoubted: 'discussion of ancestral rights on the territory of Abkhazia became one of the main issues in the conflict between the two national communities'<sup>157</sup>.

Some reference points from history emerged as more significant than others in both movements. In case of Georgia independence calls were framed around legitimization of the superior role of Georgia over the ethnic groups existent on its territory for centuries—the latter were labeled as the 'guests'<sup>158</sup>. Georgians were presented as being oppressed by the national minorities in the autonomous regions<sup>159</sup>. In case of Abkhazia, injustice was seen in the fact that Abkhazians as a titular nation were granted more privileges than the majority in the region, which was Georgian<sup>160</sup>.

This is also the period when the myth about Russian blame in deteriorating Georgian-Abkhazian relations is engineered. Soviet federative system was condemned for disrupting the balance between the titular nation and the ethnic groups. Georgian incorporation in the Soviet Union labeled as 'forced' annexation by the Bolsheviks. So,

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 90, 98.

<sup>158</sup> Victor A. Shnirelman, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001).

Vicken Cheteryan, *The Reshaping of a Borderland Region*, 21.

<sup>159</sup> Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajara before and since the Soviet Collapse", in *The Myth of "Ethnic Conflict": Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford (Center for Strategic and International Studies Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2001), 267.

<sup>160</sup> Bruno Coppieters et al., *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution—Case Studies from the European Periphery* (Academia Press, 2004), 196.

the independence movement started to identify itself as anti-Soviet.<sup>161</sup> Of course, placing the whole responsibility on Russia made it impossible to acknowledge Georgia's failure to address the issue of secessionist regions rationally. Some scholars went even so far as to suggest that 'the Georgian side has never triggered armed clashes, has never been the first to attack Abkhazian separatists'<sup>162</sup>, which can be considered an absurd statement considering the failures of the Georgian politicians to neutralize the situation. The 'obsession' of the majority with the idea that Russia is manipulating the secessionist regions continues to the present day<sup>163</sup>.

Nationalist attitude was further exacerbated by the radical government in Georgia<sup>164</sup>. Faced with the chauvinistic discourse, minorities fortified their own movements of independence. The already existent ethno-nationalist discourse in Abkhazia vigorously responded to Georgian claims—dreadful legacy of the Soviet era and specifically the incorporation in Georgia were emphasized.

Several historical events emerged as focal in Abkhazian historiography. The constitution of 1925 became the marker of independence, and its restoration became one of the pretexts for the war. Exactly 'with the 1925 constitution began the

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<sup>161</sup> Edward G. Thomas, *When Sugar Cane Grows in the Snow: Ethno-Nationalist Politics and the Collapse of the Georgian State* (Undercurrent, Vol. III, No 1, 2006), 55.

<sup>162</sup> Giorgi Zhorzholiani et al., *Historic, Political and Legal Aspects of the Conflict in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1995), 48.

<sup>163</sup> Anna Mateeva, *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflicts and Minorities* (Report by Minority Rights Group International 2002), 9.

<sup>164</sup> Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 10.  
Edmund Herzig, *The New Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999), 191.

institutionalization of Abkhazian political identity'<sup>165</sup>. In addition to this, Georgianization conducted in the 1930's was presented as an example of Abkhazian victimization by Georgians.

In short, these are the 'highlights' of Georgian-Abkhazian historiography before the conflict. Despite the fact that some historians and researchers have condemned either Abkhazia or Georgia for 'prostituting their disciplines'<sup>166</sup>, it must be understood that both sides can be held responsible for employing history in the political conflict. As Bruno Coppieters points out, even today Abkhazian-Georgian relations are based on the victimization of the self, where continuous aggression is justified by the previous suppression, making every community right in the refusal for acknowledging their culpability<sup>167</sup>.

After the war the use of history has been on decline in scholarly literature. Nevertheless, history textbooks have 'preserved' the schism in the two interpretations of the past. Because of this, it is instructive to assess the dichotomy of historiography as an ongoing debate about the national identity of both communities. This in part, illuminates the ideological background behind the conflict, which is still unsettled.

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<sup>165</sup> Georgi M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajara before and since the Soviet Collapse", in *The Myth of "Ethnic Conflict": Politics, Economics, and "Cultural" Violence*, ed. Beverly Crawford (Center for Strategic and International Studies Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2001), 266.

<sup>166</sup> This term was used by George Hewitt, professor of Caucasian Languages at the University of London in relation to the Georgian scholars.

<sup>167</sup> Ronald D. Crelisten, "Prosecuting Gross Human-Rights Violations from the Perspective of the Victim", in *Contemporary Genocides: Causes, Cases, Consequences*, ed. Albert J. Jongman (Leiden: PIOOM, 1996), 175-185.

## CONCLUSION

The reasons for Georgian-Abkhazian conflict have been widely discussed in the Georgian, Abkhazian and foreign scholarly literature. Long-held ethnic enmity, reaction of the minorities to the majority oppression, interest of the elites and the imperial policies of Russia—all have been suggested as possible justification.<sup>168</sup>

I would argue that all the abovementioned reasons, as well as the international atmosphere combined with the Soviet Union's multiethnic composition have contributed to Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation. Disintegrating federations in the 1990's and the popularity of the principle of self-determination in the last decades have become the encouragement for Abkhazia to push for its independence.

On the other hand, as Ghia Nodia explains, Georgian position can be viewed in the framework of the general tendency of creating nationally defined states. Due to this, legitimization of the political authority happened through the 'official nationalisms', which openly urged the assimilation of the minorities through cultural programs<sup>169</sup>. Instead of choosing to assimilate, Abkhazians decided to resist the incorporation in Georgia.

Since the historical material does not offer ready-made idea of the nation, the projects 'preparing the ethnic material' have been taken up by the national elites. Along with the claims of political self-sustainability, secessionist regions as well as Georgia

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<sup>168</sup> Ghia Nodia, "Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances", in *Gruzini I Abkhazi—Put' K Primireniu*, ed. Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia and Iurii Anchabadze (Moscow: Ves' Mir Publishing, 1998), 19.

<sup>169</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nationalism and Communism* (London: Methuen, 1964), 19-24.

embarked on the programs of cultural affirmation. Conflict in the intellectual sphere was directly related to the political clash.

After the war, the rising intellectual confrontation was halted. However, instead of transforming, ideological interpretations of each other remain the same. The ‘frozen’ perception of either Georgian or Abkhazian identity is also reinforced through history textbooks, which present strongly ‘nationalized’ versions of the past.

By analyzing the historical narrative of both sides I have attempted to present the complexity of arguments and their correlation with the national projects. I have intentionally avoided any further examination of the history textbooks, and namely the attempt to assess the ‘rightfulness’ of either sides’ claims. This is the task that is impossible to accomplish first of all due to the practical inexistence of ‘objective’ history in this case, and secondly because of the great share of interaction between Georgian and Abkhazian cultures that has blurred any distinct ethno-political borders.

Today, the conflict remains unresolved—the place of the ethnic groups in the Georgian nation is still undefined.<sup>170</sup> In my view, historical divergence represents one of the significant factors in the attempts for reconciliation. In order to achieve any kind of progress, the state has to be neutral in relation to the national projects and should instead try to protect the rights of the individuals.<sup>171</sup> However, at present neutrality of political actions is almost impossible due to the one-sidedness of public opinion that is reluctant to accept open dialogue. One of the ways of encouraging the discussion is by presenting the

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<sup>170</sup> Anna Mateeva, *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflicts and Minorities* (Report by Minority Rights Group International 2002), 10.

<sup>171</sup> Wayne Norman, *Nation-Building, Federalism, and Secession in the Multinational State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 70.

‘view of the other’, which can be well done by pointing out historical divergences and their role in delaying the settlement of the conflict.

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