Let There Be War: Competing Narratives and the Perpetuation of Violence in Georgia

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is concerned with the perpetuation of violence and ethnic cleansing in Georgia through competing narratives and mass displacement. Primarily through participant observation, open-ended, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, a media analysis, and a review of previously recorded testimonies of displaced persons, this work seeks to understand the process through which various sides in the conflict have defined narratives to legitimize their interests in the South Caucasus. This work attempts to redefine the August 2008 incidences within the broader context of occurrences which may have slipped underneath most headlines, including 300,000 displaced Georgians from the 1990s who have been prevented from returning home to the conflict zones.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In August 2008, Russia’s and Georgia’s militaries came to blows over a mountainous piece of land the size of Rhode Island, recognized by all nation-states of the world as a part of sovereign Georgian territory and known to most of the world (those who happen to have heard of it) as South Ossetia. Conducting research in Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi, as the war began I witnessed an information war that was brutally fought alongside the barrage of cluster bombs, landmines, and civilian tragedies. Russia allegedly engaged in cyber-warfare by shutting down Georgian government websites, while the Georgian government shut down Russian television broadcasts within Georgia. One person caught in the middle of this war was British citizen William Dunbar, who was working as the Tbilisi correspondent for Russia Today, an English language news channel owned by the Kremlin, when war in Georgia escalated to a level previously unseen. On Saturday, August 12, not even a full 48 hours after Georgian forces entered the de facto borders of South Ossetia to begin what many have hailed as the start of a new conflict in Georgia, Dunbar was asked on a live broadcast what the situation was on the ground. He had just read reports that Russian planes had bombed the central Georgian city of Gori and responded by saying that “there were unconfirmed reports that allegedly Russian planes had bombed Gori,”1 deliberately choosing his words so as not to express unconfirmed reports as facts. Later that Saturday, Dunbar was scheduled for a series of live satellite feeds to continue his reporting from Georgia, but according to Dunbar himself, those reports were cancelled due to his mention of the Gori bombings. William Dunbar’s story is quite telling of the role of the Russian media in the events of August

2008 in Georgia. Through my experience in Georgia, which will be discussed later in more detail, I gained a sense of the hold Russia still has on its former colony in the Caucasus. On a scholarly level, I have been fascinated by what I have perceived as a tightening grip more and more resembling neocolonialism under Vladimir Putin, and now Putin and Dmitri Medvedev. After being in Georgia this summer and so close to the destruction of war, it appeared that Russia, despite its role as peacekeeper, was a destabilizing force in the Caucasus, and I began to question Russia’s role even more. I began to ask the following: To what extent is Russia a force of violence and instability in Georgia? How does Russia legitimize and perpetuate violence in Georgia? In asking these questions, I have realized the significance of both official and personal narratives, as ways in which this violence is preserved. This includes the following: (1) The narrative of war as defined by the state and media, especially during those crucial early moments of conflict, is of critical importance for the purpose of legitimizing violence which is being committed or to be committed. (2) The narrative of those who are among the most affected by the violence, in Georgia’s case its displaced persons, is also significant. Without the narratives of the displaced, war and violence would likely be seen primarily through the eyes of elites, considering that the most powerful media tend to be run by the states that hold legal monopolies on violence.

Through this exploration I have found that what has been referred to as the August 2008 War, or 5-Day War, in Georgia was not a war unto itself, or even the beginning of one; in fact, it was the continuation of a war unofficially declared by Russia against Georgia for its leaving the Soviet Union in 1991, which had fronts in both
Abkhazia and Upper Kartli. This phase of the long-running war for lost territory was also a continuation of the ethnic cleansing of the ethnic Georgian population which has stood in the way of Russian backed supremacy in the conflict zones. Furthermore, the term “ethnic conflict” should be revisited in the case of the post-Soviet war in Georgia, as its simplicity and political shortsightedness contribute to a lack of understanding in these matters. This assessment of Russian/elite separatist narratives has also prompted a further examination of Georgian narratives, which can be equally extreme, as the deliberate shaping of historical understanding and perceptions of contemporary events by the Russian government and separatist leadership were not created in a vacuum. Whether by Stalin’s repressions representing Georgian oppression, or through the reactionary rhetoric and policies of former Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Abkhaz and Ossetians have emplaced narratives of violent ethnic discrimination by Georgians to refer to, whether or not they may be truth-based, exaggerated, or fabricated.

This research project is meant to inform about the situation in Georgia in August 2008 and in the days leading up to that month of dramatic events, with an emphasis on the background of the conflict reaching far into the past. I intend for this work to be accessible to as wide of an audience of those interested in the subject matter here within as possible. At the same time, I intend to add to the body of scholarly knowledge which

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2 Here I introduce the term “Upper Kartli” to more accurately describe a part of Georgia which has included a substantial number of Ossetians since the Mongol invasions of the lands north of the North Caucasus in the 13th century, but an area which has existed as a part of the Georgian heartland region of Kartli as far back as can be discerned with available sources, which is somewhat limited by language. The commonly accepted term “South Ossetia” politically confuses the situation and inhibits understanding the realities of the area. It also denotes a connection with Russian Federation controlled North Ossetia in the North Caucasus. Many in Georgia call the area in question “Samachablo,” which refers to the land at one time controlled by the ethnic Georgian Machebeli family, but this term is very politically inflammatory. Furthermore, referring to this area as the Tskhinvali region basically separates it from its traditionally being a part of the region of Kartli.
already exists on these topics, without dumbing down and compromising the intellectual tradition which has brought us to this point. This work could also assist policy-makers to familiarize themselves with a region that has largely been left to the misty shadows of obscurity, despite its strategic location. More importantly, understanding this region and the violence which has existed here in various forms could possibly inform attempts at conflict transformation at a crucial point in history.

**Background and Context of August 2008 conflict in Georgia**

In August 2008, the back and forth shelling that has become commonplace between Georgians and Ossetians in Upper Kartli spiraled into intensified violence that led to a portion of the Georgian army crossing the Ossetians’ de facto border, significant civilian casualties combined from both sides, the ethnic cleansing of Georgians from Upper Kartli, and the bombardment, ground invasion, and occupation of formerly Tbilisi-controlled territory. Most Ossetian civilians had fled into North Ossetia in the Russian Federation on specially arranged buses in the lead up to the intensified struggle. Contrastingly, 129,000 ethnic Georgians were forced from their homes as fighting began. Upper Kartli is an area which has been majority ethnic Ossetian since at least as far back as the Soviet census of 1926 and most likely long before then. Ethnic Ossetian and Georgian villages are interspersed throughout various parts of Upper Kartli. From the ceasefire forced upon Georgia in Upper Kartli in 1992 after brutal months of war, until the end of Eduard Shevardnadze’s tenure as Georgian President in late 2003, this area experienced relative peace compared with the period prior to and since. However, tensions accelerated after Mikhail Saakashvili became President in early 2004. In June 2004, through elections, Saakashvili established an alternative “South Ossetian”
government led by Dmitri Sanakoyev, an ethnic Ossetian who fought against Georgian forces in the early 1990s. This led to new hostilities as kidnappings, bombings, and firefights broke out that summer in the conflict zone. Since the summer of 2004, Upper Kartli has become the most militarized area of its size in the world, according to former Putin advisor Andrey Illarionov.³

A significant event that has been largely overlooked in the background of what occurred in Upper Kartli in August 2008 is Russia’s withdrawal from the Conventional Forces Treaty in Europe, a Soviet era treaty that stipulates where Warsaw Pact and NATO forces can position their armored divisions in relation to their land. This July 2007 event allowed Russia to move as many of its forces as necessary to prepare for an invasion of the South Caucasus⁴. Then, in April 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were together rejected from a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) in Bucharest, and Saakashvili issued a warning to the West that Russia would view this as an opportunity to do as it pleased in Georgia. Shortly thereafter, on April 16, in one of his last major acts as Russian President, Putin signed a presidential decree recognizing the documents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as legal, sparking an intensified war of rhetoric from both sides. After a Georgian spy drone was admittedly shot down over Abkhazian territory in late April, Georgia produced video evidence of a Russian MiG-29 downing the drone, and a UN investigation confirmed this in late May, reporting it as a violation of the 1992 cease fire accords. Despite this, Russia remained as the chief peacekeeping entity in Georgia. In mid-July, a Russian military exercise took place in the North Caucasus

⁴ The South Caucasus consists of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.
simulating an invasion with massive air and ground forces, including Russia’s most elite troops. Georgia’s best troops were in Iraq. After shooting increased in Upper Kartli, resulting in several deaths on both sides, Russian jets violated Georgian airspace on July 9, just prior to the arrival of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Tbilisi. Russia admitted to this violation and said it was meant to prevent further violence. In August, shelling intensified mainly between Tskhinvali and the surrounding Georgian villages. This accelerated into what has been a confused period of accusations of which side “started the war.” What is apparent is that Georgian and Russian troops converged in Upper Kartli during those brutal days of August 2008.

A particular focus of this work is on Russia’s neoimperial actions in the Caucasus. The neoimperialism of which I speak is not exactly the same written about by Noam Chomsky or David Harvey which is more firmly connected to the neoliberal economic policies of the United States and institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Despite its communist past, Russian neoimperialism is not structurally dependent upon Marxist thought. Russia’s brand of neoimperialism can be described by at least four attributes:

1. Restorative in nature, Russian neoimperialism is an attempt to regain the lost Russian/Soviet Empire.

2. Reactionary in nature, Russian neoimperialism manifests a perceived threat by the United States as an encroaching power that was largely responsible for the harsh economic situation in Russia during the 1990s.

3. Supportive of ethnic separatism, Russia has used mandates for its forces being solely responsible for peacekeeping (as in the case of Abkhazia) or the
dominant peacekeeping authority (as in Upper Kartli) in Georgia’s most troubled zones. Within this power framework, Russia has had the unchecked authority to give Russian citizenship to anyone willing to have it in the conflict zones. This “passportization” is feared by many as a soft form of annexation.

4. Petro energy and economic embargos have been used as weapons by Russia against Georgia to try to apply pressure on Western leaning President Saakashvili. The year 2006 was especially telling of this as Russia banned the import of fruit, wine, and mineral water from Georgia, cutting off Georgia’s largest export market. During this same time, Russia played favorites with supportive countries like Belarus and Armenia by not raising their energy tariffs, while Georgia and Ukraine had their prices raised steeply.

Perhaps this is not the only form of imperialism in Eurasia, as those who have wished for separation from Georgia deem Georgia itself as imperialist in trying to regain control of the territories in question. Answering this question could fill another work at least the size of this one.

Such a look at this conflict would be incomplete without mentioning the role of the United States and Russia as competing powers in the Caucasus. Despite a NATO guarantee in the 1990s that it would not encroach into the former Soviet republics, it since added Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in addition to former Warsaw Pact countries, as full members. This taking advantage of Russia’s desperate situation in the 1990s and early 2000s has been perceived as a blatant disregard for what has been called Russia’s “Monrovskii Doctrine.” Furthermore, NATO countries’ growing influence in Georgia
and Ukraine since their respective color revolutions\textsuperscript{5} has further threatened the Russian
perception of itself as the only legitimate power in Eurasia. A major aspect of this
competition involves the Caspian energy corridor which gives the West an alternative to
Russia’s pipelines to the north. Also, the connection between the neoliberal leanings of
Saakashvili and the neoliberal economic policies which helped to cripple Russia of the
1990s cannot go unmentioned.

\textbf{Research Narrative}

I initially set out to write a thesis focusing more specifically on internally
displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia in Georgia. I planned to interview IDPs for the
purpose of getting background on the causes of conflict from IDPs’ grassroots
perspectives, learning about their identities through perceptions of home and how they
refer to themselves, and getting a sense of their willingness to undertake the difficulties
of living together again with those same people who either forced them out, killed, raped,
or sat idly by, provided a resolution to the conflict might someday be found. I also meant
to use a collection of recently published testimonies of Georgian IDPs called \textit{A Heavy
Burden} to supplement my interviews.

When I left for Georgia in mid to late July, I was staying aware of the political
situation mainly between Georgia and Russia, with Upper Kartli and Abkhazia being the
setting of the conflict. Just a few days earlier, Russian planes had flagrantly and
admittedly violated Georgian airspace and I was recognizing the impotence of
international law in effect before my eyes as Russia was seemingly given a silent go

\textsuperscript{5} Georgia had its Rose Revolution in 2003, and Ukraine had its Orange Revolution in 2004. Both saw pro-
Western leaders replace highly corrupt former communist leaders who were widely perceived as
accommodating to Russian interests.
ahead by the whistling and averting eyes of the international community. Upon arrival in Tbilisi I made the appropriate contacts and arranged several interviews, hoping to use a very well connected Georgian social system for snowball sampling to gain further interviews. I began my interviews during these first few days. I then took a brief trip to visit my Peace Corps host family and to see a high mountain area that had been off limits to me due to kidnappings and banditry that existed there prior to Saakashvili. While in my host village, we huddled around a short wave radio on the afternoon that thousands of Ossetian civilians were being evacuated from the breakaway zone. There was some shared concern from locals and myself as to why such an out of the ordinary event would happen. Normally, the main highway from the west bypassed the central Georgian city of Gori, but upon my return to Tbilisi, highway construction for the purpose of building a new Silk Road linking east to west in Georgia sent us on a detour through the ancient and picturesque city of Gori, with its medieval fortress and statue of native son Joseph Stalin overlooking the town. We wound through the city along with the other traffic, past the city park, past Stalin’s birthplace and museum, past the military base, and past the Soviet-style apartment blocks where my host mom’s sister and family lived. I had visited them there many times.

Back in Tbilisi, I had a few days before a series of interviews was to take place, including a tour of one of the collective centers for IDPs where families lived together in former sanatoria. I spent this time going to lectures given by Georgian political scientists and foreign researchers who were living in Tbilisi. On Thursday, August 7, I was taken to the collective center by an IDP I had met and interviewed earlier. While there, several of her acquaintances happened to be present, and I had an impromptu focus group of IDPs
under the age of 20 who had no memories of their own of their homelands in Abkhazia; this was an interesting and somewhat unique opportunity for research. Following this group interview, I was to have eight interviews over the next five days, just prior to my leaving for the United States.

Then it happened. On the evening of August 7, as I was sitting at an outside café in Tbilisi with Georgian friends, our party became aware that Georgian troops had begun an offensive into Upper Kartli. The war that followed kept me huddled near my laptop to be able to stay aware of the situation. I remember staying up late into the night trying to follow what was happening. While constantly checking online, I also had the television on. The Georgian television medium was quite comical. On regular TV, I found three things: cultural programs showing little Georgian kids singing, booty-shaking R&B videos, and perhaps most fittingly so, Mel Gibson’s Braveheart, where another mountain nation was being invaded and valiantly defended. I was almost angry that the TV broadcast waves were not being used to keep the people informed in the interests of their safety. On Russian television, I was not surprised to find the state controlled media attentive and painting Georgia as if they were the Mongol horde or Panzer divisions storming over innocent civilians and towards the Russian heartland. I stayed awake most of the night peering through the large windows into the darkness of the north.

On Friday morning, I awoke to news that Russian planes were dropping bombs on the towns of Kareli and Gori, where I had just been. These were inside Tbilisi controlled territory and immediately began to harbor bad things for Georgia’s civilian population and territorial integrity. CNN falsely reported on Friday that Parliament had been bombed, and I was staying within easy earshot of an exploding parliament building, but
nevertheless, this illustrated how unsafe this place was perhaps becoming. On the following Monday morning, after a Russian missile taken out a radar tower near the apartment I was in, I evacuated on a US Department of State bus convoy to Armenia. While waiting in Armenia’s capital, Yerevan, I paid attention to the news from Georgia as closely as I could, including through Russian sources. I was shocked by what was being reported and considered it very biased against the Georgian side and full of incendiary propaganda. What was not being reported was what I was hearing as I talked to my host family on the phone: reports of ethnic cleansing and wives and young girls being separated from their husbands and fathers to be raped while the men were shot.

When I returned back home in the States, a bit shaken, I was able to pull myself together for the challenge of somehow redefining my scholarship based upon my experiences during the war. Aside from the relatively small amount of data that I had collected from interviews and the focus group, I had brought back the narrative of a somewhat unique experience. From that experience, I was still struck by the way media had been used so skillfully as a weapon of war, and I decided that this should be a part of my research. It soon became apparent from my collected data that coupling a media analysis with the narratives of IDPs would be an opportunity for me to express much of what was moving inside me in a scholarly and communicative manner that could benefit others.
Methods/Roadmap

The research methods I employed in this project were as follows: secondary sources analysis, media observations, notes, and analysis, open-ended, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and published testimonies from IDPs.

Chapter one delves into the background of Georgia’s conflicts with a particular focus on answering a central question surrounding the narrative from the Russian and Abkhazian sides: Have Georgia and Abkhazia been bitter enemies since ancient times? It is this type of primordial narrative which has been used to fuel fires of ethnic animosity against Georgians from Abkhaz, Ossetians, and various peoples of the North Caucasus. I pay particular attention to relations between Georgia and Abkhazia since czarist Russian imperialism first took hold in the Caucasus. Secondary sources were mainly used here to wade through and analyze the competing narratives of history in the region.

Chapter two is focused on a media analysis of a portion of Russia Today’s coverage of the August 2008 hostilities. It looks at the extent to which Russia’s Kremlin-controlled media establishment incited violence and ethnic cleansing while the Russian military stood by and allowed these things to take place. Four broadcasts of Russia Today’s news coverage were chosen randomly from the first five days after the Georgian military began to move into Tskhinvali. I use coding to pull out three main themes that seem to stand out and typify Russia Today’s broadcasts from this period. Those themes are then analyzed and discussed within the context of the war.

Chapter three is based upon the narratives of persons displaced from the continuation of conflict in Georgia since the early 1990s. It illuminates a narrative which has been largely disregarded by the world media, and especially those aligned with
Russia and the political leadership of the separatist zones from where those displaced persons have largely been barred from return. Here I use three open-ended, semi-structured interviews, a focus group inside an IDP collective center, and published testimonies from 13 IDPs, to create a snapshot of the conditions of IDPs’ lives. The information gained from these life stories were also coded to find common themes which were interwoven into their stories.

These methods are all bolstered by 29 months on the ground in Georgia, 26 of those months living within a Georgian community observing from within and without with many of the same approaches as an ethnographer. I was also learning and using an intermediate-high conversational level of the Georgian language. Accordingly, language in itself is an almost essential gateway through which cultures can be understood. All interviews were conducted partly in English and partly in Georgian.

**Limitations**

Aside from the sudden redefinition of this project, my main limitation has been finding a comparable amount of information written on the history of Abkhazia and Upper Kartli prior to August 2008. Abkhazia, as a more populous and highly coveted area, has been given recognizably adequate attention by scholars in the English language, whereas what is known as South Ossetia was all but unknown prior to August 2008. It should be mentioned that I use both Abkhazia and Upper Kartli as complementary parts of a war waged by Russia and those areas’ separatist leadership. This is a part of one of my main findings which says that what happened in August 2008 in Georgia was no beginning, but a continuation of a project of territorial reclamation.
CHAPTER TWO: COMPETING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

The Caucasian knot metaphor for the complexity of the tangled history and contemporary situation in Georgia is oft used, yet strikingly appropriate, as the numerous armies of nations which have passed through this craggy and verdant isthmus have left their indelible marks on culture and landscape. For all but three of the past 207 years, Moscow or Petersburg have, in some way, controlled at least some part of what has traditionally been Georgian territory. From the czars to Stalin (despite his being part Georgian) to Gorbachev to Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev, the Russian/Soviet state has used divide-and-conquer tactics and disproportionate violence to subdue this area. This chapter will look at the historical relations between Georgians and Abkhaz, the nationalist rhetoric of elites from different sides, the 1990s conflict itself in Georgia, and the contrasting reigns of Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Saakashvili.

Understanding the complex historical interpretations of Georgia’s ethno-territorial conflicts is essential to comprehending the current situation in Georgia. For such an understanding, it is particularly imperative to examine the history of these conflicts through the course of three different eras: pre-Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), post-Treaty of Georgievsk to the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia (1921), and Bolshevik invasion to the present. These time periods best illustrate the intensification of ethnic divisions in Georgia, especially since Russia’s heavy hand has gripped the Caucasus. Such an examination shows the extent to which Russia’s presence, both Czarist and Soviet, has

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6 The Treaty of Georgievsk was signed between the Georigan kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti and the Russian Empire on July 24, 1783. The Treaty entrusted Eastern Georgia to Russia as a protectorate, but promised territorial integrity, the continuation of the Bagrationi royal dynasty and that of the Catholicos of the Georgian Orthodox Church. However, on December 18, 1800, Czar Paul I officially annexed Georgia into the Russian Empire, thereby abrogating the Treaty of Georgievsk.
been a guarantor of violent discord in Georgia, despite a long history of cooperation among diverse ethnic populations living there.

Consequently, I contend that primordial interpretations of ethnicity and ethnic struggle, primarily fueled by the rhetoric of nationalist elites on the Abkhaz, Ossetian, and Georgian sides have largely been detrimental to stability in Georgia, especially since Soviet disintegration. Furthermore, Georgians and Abkhaz, with similar cultural traits, have cooperated as members of the same governments and communities going back perhaps as far as the 6th century. Ossetians came to Georgia from the North Caucasus seeking refuge from Mongol rule during 1288 BCE and largely integrated into local culture. Consequently, the largely primordial view of ancient hatreds existing between Georgia and Ossetians and Georgians and Abkhaz is an historically incorrect political construction, such attitudes having been shaped mainly by the Soviet experience, the armed conflict of the 1990s, and falsely crafted revisionist history.

Before 1783

According to Soviet ethnicities expert Svetlana Chervonnaya, Assyrian sources show that Georgian and Abkhaz tribes coexisted together on the same land during pre-Christian times. In the late 8th century, the Abkhazian kingdom was made up of a majority of Kartvelian Georgian8 tribes, including Laz, Megrelians, and Svans, with the Abkhaz population making up a distinct minority.9 According to journalist Suzanne

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8 Kartvelian Georgians are generally considered the main ethnic group in Georgia, as opposed to Abkhaz, Ossetians, Armenians, Azeris, Kurds, etc. This is a way to distinguish ethnic Georgians from general citizens of Georgia, who may be from some other group. Languages of the Georgian language family (Georgian, Megrelian, Svan, Laz, etc.) and Orthodox Christianity are the main signs of Kartvelian Georgians.
Goldenberg, by the early 6th century, monarchs from Iberia ruled western Georgia.\(^\text{10}\) Iberia was the name of ancient eastern Georgia, and by Goldenberg’s own definition, Abkhazia is historically a part of western Georgia. British historian W.E.B. Allen also gives the impression that the Abkhaz and Laz peoples were constantly influencing one another, partly due to fighting together to ward off common enemies, such as the Persians and Armenians.\(^\text{11}\) An emphasis should also be placed on the military alliance between Kartvelian Georgians and Abkhaz in defending their shared land against such invaders as the “Seljuk Sultanate (the battle of Basiani in 1205), the Abbasid Caliphate, and – with the eastward expansion westward of the Empire of Genghis Khan … from the Tatar-Mongol hordes whose invasion created a threat to the Christian civilization of Transcaucasia.”\(^\text{12}\)

Georgians and Abkhaz coexisted in various ways in Western Georgia during the Middle Ages, including ecclesiastically. Byzantine Christianity heavily influenced both the Abkhazian and Georgian Church. In fact, Abkhazia used Greek as the language of its church since the 6th century. However, according to a Soviet history from the 1940s, the Abkhazian Church later began to use Georgian as its official liturgical language. This was a part of the Abkhazian Church’s voluntary transfer from the authority of the Byzantine Church to the authority of the Georgian Church, headquartered in Mtskheta in Eastern Georgia, in the 9th century. Another way that the consolidated kingdom of Western Georgia used the Georgian language was political. According to Gigineishvili, all


\(^{12}\) Chervonnaya, p. 13.
surviving documents from this realm are in the Georgian language and alphabet.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, even after the Mongol invasions, which broke up the Western Georgian medieval kingdom during the latter half of the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, the Abkhaz principality retained Georgian as the language of its Church and civic administration.\textsuperscript{14}

**Czarist Dominance in Georgia as Related to Georgia’s Conflict Zones**

Following years of war mainly with Turks and Persians, mass displacements, forced trafficking of Georgians as slaves, and the near emptying of eastern Georgian lands especially by Shah Abbas I of Persia during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, Georgia sought protection from its religiously like-minded neighbor to the north. In 1763, the Treaty of Georgievsk was agreed to by Georgian King Erekle II and Catherine the Great of Russia. It afforded the Kartli-Kakhetian monarchy to retain internal sovereignty over its kingdom and the Georgian Orthodox Church to remain autocephalous, as Georgia’s lands would be protected by Russian imperial forces. In return, Georgians would be expected to assist in fighting Russia’s enemies, and the Georgian nobility would swear fealty to the Russian tsars. Such a beneficial arrangement for Georgia was short-lived, as Czar Paul I broke the Treaty of Georgievsk by abolishing the Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801.

One by one, the Georgian kingdoms began to fall to Russia. Historian Muriel Atkin has written that, due to the strategic position of Sukhumi on the Black Sea, “Russia claimed Abkhazia as a vassal state,” and that in “1810 … Russians took Sukhumi and put their client in power.”\textsuperscript{15} This is very much an understatement compared with other

\textsuperscript{13} Gigineishvili
\textsuperscript{14} Khorava, Bejan. *On Issue of the social-political development of the Abkhazian principality in the late Middle Ages*. Artanudji 10, 2000, pp. 30-31.
accounts of resistance to Russian imperialism in Abkhazia, followed by reprisals. Chervonnaya talks about the similarities between Abkhaz and Kartvelian Georgian reactions to Russian rule with “revolts, peasant uprisings, and political disturbances (the revolt in Abkhazia or Lukhny in 1866, which was cruelly suppressed by tsarist troops).” She goes on to reveal that the Abkhaz supported their previous oppressors, the Ottoman Turks, in the Russo-Turkish War from 1877 to 1878. The result of this was a verdict that exiled 50,000 Abkhaz (a majority of the Abkhaz population) to eastern and northern provinces of Russia. Abkhazia was left as an empty land almost completely deserted in what were thriving centers of Abkhaz culture,16 despite the protests of leaders of the Georgian national movement who were vociferously against such a cruel territorial grab.17 This purging of Abkhaz intellectual elite, with their long-standing affiliation with Kartvelian Georgians, set a tone for ethnic strife, since those left behind did not have the same cultural connections with their long-time territorial cousins.

After protests against Russia’s mass Abkhaz deportations by the Georgian intellectual elite, Russians and other nationalities began settling in Abkhazia. According to Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba, a document called The Memorandum on the Colonization in the Sukhumi District was created by Russia in 1895, and in regards to Abkhazia, it clearly states that, “It is desirable to save as much free land as possible for the settlement of exclusively native Russian people.”18 Kartvelian Georgians and Abkhaz

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16 Chervonnaya, p. 19.
were restricted from settlement or resettlement in Abkhazia during this time, though Georgian peasants would move into the almost emptied Abkhazian territories in search of better lives. It seems that Russians did little, if anything to stop this, allowing for future antagonism between Abkhaz and Georgians. Rather than Abkhazia entering freely and autonomously into the Russian Empire as claimed by Lakoba\textsuperscript{19} and Voronov\textsuperscript{20}, the czar carved up Abkhazia into districts that caused Abkhazia as a political entity to cease to exist until after 1917.\textsuperscript{21} Accordingly, to make the argument that Abkhazia entered into a voluntary pact with Russia during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is both a denial of Russia’s colonial ambitions there and of the Abkhaz’s defense against invaders from the north.

In the chaos following Russian socialist revolutions in 1917, there was a struggle between the Menshevik Transcausasusian Federal Socialist Republic (TFSR), which Georgia had joined, and Bolshevik factions still left in Abkhazia. According to Chervonnaya, these factions, including the Military Revolutionary Council (MRC) and Revolutionary Black Sea sailors, subjected the population of Abkhazia to “brutality and excesses” which required the latter entities to be overthrown by the Abkhazian People’s Council (APC). This council allied itself with the TFSR, which sent in the Georgian National Guard, and the alliance was successful in expelling the Bolsheviks from Abkhazia. Abkhazian members of the APC wrote a letter of gratitude to Noe Zhordania’s independent Georgian government in September 1919. The letter expressed, “Georgian troops appeared in Abkhazia during the fight against the Bolsheviks … It gives us pleasure to note the impartiality and correctness with which the National Guard treated

\textsuperscript{19} Chervonnaya, pp. 15-16.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p. 16
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
Abkhazia’s whole population.”22 It should be noted that in 1918, Georgians were 42.1% to the 21.4% of Abkhaz in Abkhazia.23

The Soviet Ethnic Experiment

If there was such a long-standing and relatively peaceful connection between Kartvelian Georgians and Abkhaz, how did the region erupt into a state of turmoil that would accommodate the barbarism of atrocities associated with ethnic cleansing in the early 1990s? Perhaps the most easily recognizable cause of soured relations between the two is the hierarchical system of ethnofederalism that made Abkhazia subordinate within Georgia and Kartvelian Georgians underrepresented in various aspects of society within Abkhazia, despite Kartvelian Georgians being the majority in that territory.24 Within this structure, the Soviet elite gave union republics the highest status, followed by autonomous republics, then autonomous regions. Prior to the existence of the Soviet Union, and during Georgia’s independence, Abkhazia was an autonomous area within Georgia, as agreed upon by the Abkhaz following the assistance of the Georgian National Guard in throwing out the Bolsheviks. Upon the invasion of Lev Trotsky’s Bolshevik army in the winter of 1921, both Georgian independence and Abkhaz autonomy ended. It appears as almost a formality that the Abkhazian SSR was proclaimed on March 31, 1921, since Moscow retained direct control over the territory and the term ‘autonomy’ in reference to Abkhazia was not used in official documents in the first Soviet decade (1921-1931). In 1922, Abkhazia was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Socialist

22 Chervonnaya, 23-24
23 Chervonnaya, 24
Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) along with Georgia, and in the 1936 Stalin Constitution, Abkhazia was confirmed as existing within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Each group deemed to be the titular nation in each of these divisions of Soviet national territories enjoyed certain privileges, such as the ability to have one’s national language taught in schools. Abkhaz in Abkhazia, however, being a part of the Georgian SSR, were initially forced to write their language in the Georgian script. It was such matters of cultural antagonism through Soviet rule which sparked the Abkhaz fear of Kartvelian Georgianization in Abkhazia and periodic demands for Abkhazia’s becoming an SSR. In response, during the 1970s, Soviet authorities granted the Abkhaz their own university in Sokhumi, which in turn caused Georgian professors to form a Kartvelian Georgian university after some violence and perceived discrimination. This cycle of fear and perception of discrimination set the tone for much of the 1980s, when Gorbachev’s encouragement of glasnost and perestroika released the fomenting troubles from their Pandora’s Box, allowing Soviet ethnic minorities to voice their aspirations louder than ever before.

It is also important to note the framework within which Soviet policy towards nationalities worked. Ronald Suny, Soviet nationalities expert and historian of Georgia, argues that the Soviet idea of ethnic identity as primordial was perpetuated by the Soviet state for its own political purposes:

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[25] Chervonnaya, 27
[26] Sokhumi is the main city in Abkhazia.
[27] Goldenberg, 104
Ethnicity was almost universally conceived (and enforced) as a primordial -- indeed, biologically determined -- essence, national identity provided both opportunities for social mobility (within the Georgian republic in this case) and serious disadvantages. The Soviet example illustrates a second influence or identification when identity categories are externally generated, ascribed, or imposed by the state or other authorities.\(^{28}\)

Here Suny shows that a person’s place in society was at least somewhat dependent upon one’s ethnicity, but more so determined by state constructs. Ironically, Soviet promotion and perpetuation of primordial ethnic understandings among the diverse population of the Soviet Republics determined these constructs.

Ethnicity defined official national status on Soviet passports\(^{29}\). According to Suny, “‘Georgian’ as a group identity is a recent construct initiated by late 19th century intellectuals and finalized during the Soviet period when the borders of the republic configurated (sic) an ethnically complex territory with a dominant Kartli cultural component.”\(^{30}\) Suny, in conjunction with Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities\(^{31}\), perhaps shows the ease with which one could believe in primordial views of ancient hatreds as prescribed by the state, as the same primordial ideas form the foundations of the nationalist historical interpretations which have fueled Georgia’s


\(^{29}\) Soviet passports were the primary documents used for domestic identification


\(^{31}\) This work postulates that nations as coherent communities are politically “imagined” and based upon a social construction which stems from the modern age. Central to Anderson’s thesis is his point that this construction is based on mass communication mainly through print media.
conflicts. If ethnicity is considered primordial in nature, then it is a possible outcome of this thinking to consider struggles between perceived long established ethnic groups as ancient, especially with the assistance of caustic, political rhetoric.

**Nationalist Histories**

Democratically elected President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia became quite well-known for the phrase “Georgia for Georgians”\(^3\), which was attributed to him in the early 1990s. This refers to a popular nationalist desire of the time for Kartvelian Georgians to control a sovereign and complete Georgian territory. Despite this phrase mainly being a reaction against Russian domination for centuries, such a statement roused Georgia’s ethnic minorities into resistance. In a general sense, the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia came about due to those regions’ commitments to remain autonomous areas within the Soviet Union, rather than joining an independent Georgia caught up deeply in the throes of such nationalism.

Beyond this, Gamsakhurdia seized upon the deep, and sometimes mystical, religiosity of Kartvelian Georgians that had survived the godless communist days of the Soviet Union. He once commented approvingly of a tenth century Georgian Orthodox monk’s work titled *Appraisal and Glorification of the Georgian Language* by writing

… in Christian terminology the self-same story contained … the once rising and mighty Nation of Kartveli --- the Georgians --- and its Language, which have been humiliated and thrown down for four thousand years. But then this

humiliation is the same for the Georgian Nation and its Language as Christ’s Baptism, Death and Burial, inevitably followed by Resurrection and ascension into Heaven. Likewise, the Georgian Nation shall re-emerge after this four day-long baptism, and take its place once more at the Return of the Universal Spiritual Leader and Judge of Mankind, as it used to do in times of old.33

This venture into exceptionalism promoting Georgians, their language, and religion as divinely connected to a “Universal Spiritual Leader and Judge of Mankind” by an autocrat such as Gamsakhurdia frightened ethnic minorities into fearing persecution.34 Furthermore, during the May 1991 elections that saw Gamsakhurdia elected head of the Georgian state by 87 percent of votes cast, Azeris, Armenians, [Ossetians], Russians, and other ethnic minorities were not permitted to vote.35 Professor Dodona Kiziria, a US-based Georgian political analyst, adds that these voting restrictions were not a part of an outright campaign to disenfranchise ethnic minority voters, but a direct result of a nationalistic stance against Russia, which had ruled Georgia in some way or other for almost all of the past 200 years.36 Nevertheless, ethnic minority voters were to a large extent disenfranchised, and many ethnic minorities perceived this as more of the Georgia for Georgians policy, which did not seem to include them.37


34 It is important to note that approximately one-third of Abkhazians and Ossetians consider themselves Muslims. Svante Cornell. “Religion as a Factor in Caucasian Conflicts.” Civil Wars. 1.3 (1998) 2.

35 Van der Leeuw, p. 152.

36 D. Kiziria (personal communication, April 11, 2008)

37 Professor Kiziria also disputes public perception that “Georgia for Georgians” was Gamsakhurdia’s slogan. She says that this perception was shaped by the Shevardnadze government and Russia in an attempt to discredit Gamsakhurdia and lay blame for the disintegration of Georgia on his feet.
Gamsakhurdia’s chauvinistic rhetoric extended farther than Georgia for Georgians, as he used a slanted version of history to claim that the Abkhaz nation historically never existed. At nationalist rallies in Tbilisi on April 8 1989, Gamsakhurdia’s followers distributed leaflets that said, “Let Abkhazians immediately leave the territory of Georgia and let us annul the autonomy of Abkhazia.”

Some Kartvelian Georgians even suggested that any search for ancient Abkhazian toponyms would never possibly bear fruit since they were only created during more recent decades to replace original Georgian place names.

Furthermore, some Kartvelian Georgian chauvinist historians have claimed that the Abkhaz only migrated down from the North Caucasus in the 19th century. This gives cause for some Kartvelian Georgians to reduce the status of the Abkhaz to unruly guests. Such claims have been rejected by historian Levan Gigineishvili and Chervonnaya, who recognize the Abkhaz as a separate ethnic group with its own language and place names, and having occupied its territory for thousands of years.

The Abkhaz separatist view of history is based upon the idea that Georgia and Abkhazia are completely separate ethno-cultural regions which have been at odds for centuries. Such a model of “ancient hatreds,” that was the norm in describing ethnic conflicts during the tumultuous 1990s, has been used by historians and politicians alike to justify the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia. In fact, President Bill Clinton lumped

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41 Gigineishvili and Chervonnaya.
together the conflicts in Rwanda, the Balkans, and Georgia in his first inaugural address.\textsuperscript{42} In the case of Abkhazia, mass hatred and fear is far more recent than ancient. In George Hewitt’s edited tribute to his wife’s homeland\textsuperscript{43}, \textit{The Abkhazians}, Abkhaz scholar Oleg Bgazhba asserts that an Abkhazian kingdom “enjoyed a history quite independent from any Kartvelian (Georgian) entity up to the time when, by right of dynastic succession, the united kingdom of the Abkhazians and Kartvelians came to subsume the 200-year-old Abkhazian Kingdom in 978.”\textsuperscript{44} However, as has been mentioned in this chapter, Assyrian sources contradict this assertion.

Nationalists on both sides adhere to primordial interpretations of ethnicity, viewing ethnicity as a fixed and encumbering entity to the point that ethnic groups in proximity are often required to be at odds with one another. A Russian historiographer, Jurij Voronov, brings one such perspective into the Abkhaz/Georgian nationalist history war. In what has appeared to some observers as an attempt to stir up ethnic strife in the Caucasus\textsuperscript{45}, Voronov says that the Abkhaz kingdom only joined the Georgian kingdom according to the right of maintaining its autonomy. Contrastingly, Gigineishvili shows that the kingdom was fully integrated.\textsuperscript{46} Voronov also accentuates the rivalry between the Megrelian\textsuperscript{47} Georgian Dadiani dynasty and the Abkhazian Anchabadzes to show a

\textsuperscript{42} First Inaugural Address of William J. Clinton, January 20, 1993  
http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/clinton1.htm

\textsuperscript{43} Hewitt is sometimes criticized for blatant political bias towards the Abkhaz separatist movement due to his wife’s ethnicity.


\textsuperscript{45} Gigineishvili

\textsuperscript{46} Gigineishvili

\textsuperscript{47} Megrelians (also known as Mingrelians) are a part of a Kartvelian ethnic subgroup that speaks a language almost completely incomprehensible to non-Megrelian native speakers. They come primarily from Samegrelo and Abkhazia in the west.
primordial ancient hatred between Kartvelian Georgians and the Abkhaz. However, in the context of how feuds and mini-wars frequently occurred between Caucasian principalities, ethno-cultural characteristics were likely not the cause of such violence, since Georgian principalities often fought each other over destabilized territorial issues. Coupled with Voronov is an Abkhaz journalist named Vitali Sharia, who has emphasized the solidarity between Abkhaz and North Caucasus tribes in repelling invading Megrelians during tumultuous times. What Sharia does not mention is that these warriors from the North Caucasus were mercenaries that Megrelians sometimes also hired.48 Also, neither Voronov or Sharia place proper emphasis on the military alliance between Kartvelian Georgians and Abkhaz in defending their shared land against such invaders as the “Seljuk Sultanate (the battle of Basiani 1205), the Abbasid Caliphate, and – with the eastward expansion westward of the Empire of Genghis Khan … from the Tatar-Mongol hordes whose invasion created a threat to the Christian civilization of Transcaucasia.”49

Enter the growing Russian Empire firmly into the picture during the 19th century. Just as the writing of history to fit the contemporary conflict between Abkhaz and Kartvelian Georgians has included projecting such divisions into the ancient past, the same is true for painting the annexing of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire as a reflection of today’s cooperation between Abkhazia and Russia. As mentioned previously, Hewitt, Lakoba, and Voronov have been involved in these efforts. This is evidence of a possible attempt to cover up the history of Russian annexation in the Caucasus by Russian and Abkhaz historians.

48 Khorava, pp. 48-49.
49 Chervonnaya, p. 13.
It is somewhat ironic that one of the main criticisms by Abkhaz of Georgians during the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries is their colonial incursion into Abkhazia, mainly under the watchful eyes of Stalin and his Georgian vassal Lavrenti Beria. Stalin and Beria may have been Georgians (or maybe just part Georgian, as the case may be with Stalin), but their overall policies did not favor Georgians. According to Suzanne Goldenberg, “Stalin … spared no quarter against his native Georgia …” Although much has been made of Stalin’s Georgian roots and the Caucasian origins of his closest allies, … it is generally thought that the purges, arrests and executions of the late 1930s were visited more harshly on the peoples of the Caucasus than elsewhere. While the purges resulted in the expulsion of an average of 9 percent of party members throughout the Soviet Union, in the Caucasus the proportion was nearly 19 percent…50 In fact, Stalin’s purges affected Georgians so greatly that Krushchev focused a policy of cultural renewal on Georgia which gave it “the most highly educated population in the Soviet Union.”51

The Lead Up to War in 1992

The most important source relating to the Abkhaz/Georgian War of 1992-1993 is Svetlana Chervonnaya, herself not of Abkhaz or Georgian ancestry, and sent to Abkhazia after championing ethnic minority rights in Tatarstan to work with those in the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet who would become the ruling elite in Abkhazia. Not only does her background denote a sense of possible objectivity, but she was also in the right place at the right time, with access to valuable documents in relation to the conflict, with which she has written about what transpired. From Chervonnaya’s perspective, the Chairman of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, Vladislav Ardzinba, himself a historian, and

50 Goldenberg, 38
51 Goldenberg, 40
his close associates seized on an opportunity of instability and confusion in Georgia and the crumbling Soviet Union to advance their own war against Georgia for the purpose of personal political gain. These Abkhaz nationalists also considered themselves Soviet patriots fighting against Eduard Shevardnadze, a chief architect of the dismantling of the Soviet Union. Such statements as “Shevardnaze destroyed the Soviet Union, let his Georgia be destroyed now,”\(^5\) rang loud and clear from the Abkhaz leadership, just as “Georgia for Georgians” had from Gamsakhurdia. Chervonnaya recognizes one of the main immediate causes of the war as the reckless ambition of a small group bent on an agenda they thought to be backed by history. In her time spent working with this group, she heard statements like, “It is the goal of my life to take Abkhazia away from Georgia.” (Chervonnaya, 5) She remembers saying to one of these separatist group members, “But this means that you are prepared to sacrifice others people’s lives and the peace of this land in order to achieve your ends.” The response was “You do not understand politics. In the scheme of things, this is of very little importance. The main thing is to wrest Abkhazia from Georgia, annexe (sic) her to Russia and start a movement here which will only end with the revival of a great state.”\(^5\) A disturbing example of this political tunnel vision is the hording of food and other supplies during the brutal winter of 1991-92, during which hundreds died of starvation in Abkhazia at the same time while the separatists mobilized an army.\(^5\) Perhaps this added to the brutality that the Abkhaz directed against Georgians, seeing them as symbols of this suffering.

\(^5\) Chervonnaya, p. 5
\(^5\) Chervonnaya, pp. 95-96.
Chervonnaya later describes how the Abkhaz separatists, not democratically elected since Georgians were still the majority in Abkhazia, lured unruly Georgian forces into Abkhazia by arranging a joint mission to rid the Gali region (bordering the Samegrelo region of Georgia) of Gamsakhurdia’s forces, who had kidnapped a member of the Georgian parliament, and to secure the railways from banditry. According to Chervonnaya, and her perspective near those in the inner circle of Abkhaz war-making, it was Abkhaz troops who fired upon these Georgians who were supposedly on a peacekeeping mission, in full knowledge that they would be backed up by Russian weapons, supplies, and even troops. She also tells how the Abkhaz separatist leadership had been planning their war and diverting resources despite the poverty and hunger of their supposed protectorates. The tragedies that followed were enacted by both sides, resulting in close to 30,000 overall deaths and over 250,000 displaced Georgians, many forced to walk ill-equipped through snow-covered mountains, where the weak perished. It was mainly those same separatists who frenzied the Abkhaz into war, and Russia, with its neoimperialist yearnings following the loss of control of former Russian territory during the 1990s who benefited from this.

**Armed Conflict in Abkhazia**

Soviet oppression of Abkhaz culture and forced integration into the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic’s territory during the 20th century, after a brief period of autonomy, especially positioned Abkhazia to violently react against the rise of Georgian nationalism during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In August 1990, Abkhazia’s Supreme
Soviet council declared itself a full union republic, therefore declaring itself independent from Georgian rule. The existing tensions between Kartvelian Georgians and the Abkhaz were strengthened on March 17, 1991, when ethnic Abkhaz and non-Kartvelian inhabitants of Abkhazia voted overwhelmingly to preserve the Soviet Union within Mikhail Gorbachev’s thrust for greater political and economic reforms. This, in turn, acknowledged the recently declared autonomous status of Abkhazia outside of Georgia.

During December of 1991, while the struggle of paramilitary forces against Georgian President Gamsakhurdia raged on, Abkhazia elected its own parliament in reaction to the official disintegration of the Soviet Union. When Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in early 1992, he was preoccupied with restoring order after the civil war that ousted Gamsakhurdia, and with settling the conflict in South Ossetia. By August 14, 1992, Shevardnadze made the Tbilisi government’s presence felt in the breakaway Abkhazian territory. According to Shevardnadze, he sent his Georgian troops there to hunt for remnants of Gamsakhurdia’s followers. These Georgian government forces swept through southern Abkhazia and took Sukhumi by the end of August, while the de-facto president Ardzinba’s government fled north to Gudauta.

Perhaps Shevardnadze and his military leaders expected a speedy victory over the outnumbered Abkhaz forces when they invaded in August 1992. However, as Uri

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60 The Georgian military leaders who invaded Abkhazia in August 1992, including Tengiz Kitovani, were the leaders of the same paramilitary units that had been terrorizing Georgia though extortion, mafia control, and murder.
Ra’an an writes in his essay titled “Imperial Elements in Russia’s Doctrines and Operations,”

By February and March of 1993, in the greatest miracle since the loaves and the fishes, backward Abkhaz mountaineers suddenly acquired a high-tech air force, including Russian (current generation) Sukhoi-25 and -27 planes, that bombed Sukhumi, a major city, and defeated the poorly armed Georgian forces. In the aftermath, most ethnic Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia. The Russian army then interposed itself between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, effectively preventing the return of the Georgian refugees.61

And thus a minority of Abkhaz became a majority as some 250,000 Kartvelian Georgians, who had comprised 45.7 percent of Abkhazia’s population as recently as 198962, fled the destruction of what they called their homeland.

Shevardnadze to Saakashvili

The Shevardnadze years will likely be seen henceforth through the lens of the Rose Revolution, which brought current President Mikhail Saakashvili to power. Though Eduard Shevardnadze became President of Georgia only after the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia, he effectively had a large amount of control over Georgia for most of thirty years between 1972 and 2003. He was named First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party in 1972, and after initially implementing a sweeping anti-corruption campaign, he was quieted by party heads in Moscow who were


somehow reluctant to see the growing shadow economy wither, despite its anti-socialist implications. This may have been a lesson for Shevardnadze, who “always had good intuitions about what the informal rules were,” to learn where the true power lay. This may seem like old history to some, as Shevardnadze went on to become admired by many in the West as Soviet Foreign Minister, but it is important to illustrate that his first experience leading Georgia was forged in the acceptance of corruption.

When Shevardnadze returned to independent Georgia during that terribly tumultuous year of 1992, he was invited by the same military cabal that had recently and violently overthrown Gamsakhurdia. The leaders of this council of warlords were Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani, who had effectively taken control of Tbilisi and forged the ruling Military Council by early January 1992. Without Shevardnadze’s worldwide legitimacy garnered from his days spent by Gorbachev’s side, these little known Georgians had no real hope for widespread international recognition of Georgia.

Using political prowess honed at the uppermost levels of the Soviet structure, Shevardnadze was able to outplay Kitovani, Ioseliani, and their supporters and rise to the position of most powerful political figure in Georgia by the middle of 1995. During this process, Shevardnadze used his police powers to arrest or drive out those criminal gangs that had been ravaging the regions. Such measures brought new found relative stability, as internal trade and transport increased. Consequently, in many ways, Shevardnadze offered this stability in exchange for his own legal mafia taking power. Those same

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64 Ibid.
former communist nomenklatura and shadow economy elites who had forged strong relations since the 1960s, and later co-opted Shevardnadze during his first power reign, became quite strong as a result of Shevardnadze’s consolidation of power. The price of stability was high during these dark times in Georgia, and the only way to calm the situation was to buy the influence of those with financial power.

The stability brought by the Georgian President and his new directions of authority included a GDP growth rate rise from 2.4 percent in 1995 to 10.6 percent\(^{66}\), but this indicates very little about a rise in the standards of living of ordinary Georgians, since the Georgian economy was controlled by an almost feudal system of economic fealty which could be traced all the way to the Silver Fox\(^{67}\) himself at the top. A usual saying during the last years prior to the Rose Revolution was, “Wealth is a sure sign of corruption and criminality,” and this almost always was the case. In fact, “tax legislation was written in such a way that legal businesses became unprofitable.”\(^{68}\)

The way this inherently corrupt system worked was in a way that forced all government officials to break the law. A government position had a literal price. For instance, a gamgebeli (city or village boss) in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region reportedly paid $50,000 for his position, while the Minister of Internal Affairs, Kakha Targamadze, likely paid $2,000,000 for his position, at the behest of one of Eduard Shevardnadze’s sons.\(^{69}\) The cost of the most lucrative positions were well worth it because one could use influence for business deals, but especially for collecting fees in return for granting

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\(^{66}\) Ibid.  
\(^{67}\) This was Shevardnadze’s nickname dating back at least to the 1970s, when he had white hair even at a young age.  
\(^{68}\) Nizharadze  
\(^{69}\) Wheatley
employment. I recall my own shock while working in the Georgian public school system at finding out that such corruption was even endemic there. Teachers paid fees to keep their jobs while parents paid teachers so that their children could have better grades. Clearly it seems that corruption permeated most, if not all, levels of Georgian society.

There are few secrets kept in Georgia. It was well-known that such rampant corruption was going on all around, and because Shevardnadze was connected to it all from the top, as if he were a medieval king time warped into postmodern mafia capitalism, everything was blamed on him. If someone had dumped a load of garbage beside the river, it was Shevardnadze’s fault. During the first time I lived in Georgia (2001-2003), “It is Shevardnadze’s fault” was invoked perhaps most frequently when the electricity went out, which to a great extent was his fault, since paying customers’ electricity was often diverted to non-paying industrial customers who were well-connected, both literally and figuratively. In June 2003, I left this situation in Georgia just five months prior to the end of Shevardnadze and his leftover, neo-Soviet system of government-assisted, shadow capitalism, and the beginning of Mikhail Saakashvili’s presidency.

Saakashvili was elected with a mandate of 96% of Georgians voters in an election considered by international observers as largely fair and free. His early presidency can be characterized by the possibly unrealistic expectations of restoration of territorial integrity in conflict zones after an early victory deposing Aslan Abashidze, the near despotic leader in Adjara. Unfortunately for Saakashvili, Russia’s economic ascendency coincided with his own, and the next four years were plagued by energy blockades and economic embargos by the northern neighbor as Georgia moved closer to its goal of joining NATO,
an obvious threat to Russia and its desire to keep the Caucasus within its sphere of influence. Saakashvili’s own actions are also to blame for his decline in popularity in Georgia. Despite the desire of the Georgian population to get past the inherent corruption that carried over from the Soviet years, they were ill-prepared for the Columbia Law School educated Saakashvili’s sweeping ant-corruption reforms that imprisoned family members and good friends everywhere. Furthermore, the quickened pace of privatization set forth by Saakashvili’s belief in neoliberal economics was upsetting to Georgians who felt their country was being sold out from under them. The growing disfavor with their president, combined with an ambitious opposition that some say is backed by the Kremlin, caused thousands of Georgians to take to the streets on November 7, 2007. After becoming somewhat unruly, the crowd was dispersed with tear gas and some cameras were broken or taken during the event. It was only during the August 2008 conflict that Georgians largely decided to back their president in dark times, something that has waned significantly since the November 7 anniversary.

This chapter examines historical patterns of cooperation and allegiance between Georgians and Abkhaz, showing that prior to Russia’s exiling 50,000 Abkhaz during the nineteenth century, almost all documents available suggest that Georgia and Abkhazia shared cultural and political relations to a far greater extent than they were bitterly divided. Here, it is also shown that the ethno-nationalist political rhetoric of elites has done much to disturb relations between two peoples primarily integrated long prior to Stalin’s divide-and-conquer rule. The political and economic landscape of the post-Soviet conflict in Georgia is discussed, highlighting the personality of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a pivotal figure in the darkest times of war in the 1990s. Finally, there is a partial focus on
the two Georgian presidents, Shervardnadze and Saakashvili, whose tenures represent distinct and contrasting periods and systems, outside of Gamsakhurdia’s chaos.
CHAPTER 3: MEDIA, THE STATE, AND VIOLENCE

Next the statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing falsities, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception.

Mark Twain

I was sitting in an outdoor café in Shardeni, the part of Tbilisi that is perhaps the most representative of the economic and civil society development which has taken place there, especially since the post-Shevardnadze years. I was having drinks and dinner with Georgian friends, some new and some old. I am not sure who got the message, but it was likely Giorgi, who works in one of the state ministries in Tbilisi. Georgia had started an offensive into the Tskhinvali70 district of Upper Kartli, which is known to most of the world as South Ossetia, an independent sounding and relatively recently created name for the breakaway area which includes a large part of the Georgian heartland.

Very soon after that, I set out for the apartment where I was staying, which happened to be two blocks from the Georgian parliament. Winding through the narrow, cobblestone streets that were much better lit than when I lived in Georgia from 2001-

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70 Tskhinvali is also the name of the main city in Upper Kartli.
2003, it struck me how comfortable I was walking around Tbilisi at night -- a testament to the relative safety brought here by the rule of law established since the Rose Revolution of late 2003. Five years ago, I would have avoided walking like this at almost all costs. At that time, some other Americans who did not heed the Peace Corps safety and security warnings were robbed and beaten.

I went online as soon as possible to check the news. I had a sense that this conflict was going to be much more violent than the usual chest thumping and random shots fired from either side. In fact, Giorgi had left a lasting impression in my mind just after he announced what was happening. My response to hearing that Georgian troops were moving in was: “Is Misha (the current Georgian president) crazy? I hope this is a false report!” Giorgi replied, “This is for real, and I am glad. We have waited too long to get our land back.” As I accessed bbc.com, I found that war had begun, and it was all over the world media.

The media is a lens through which the intentions of those who control information may often be peered critically into. Such is the case with Russian and Georgian state-owned media. For two governments so dependent on foreign currency flows into their economies, whether they be from foreign direct investments, aid, or petroleum and natural gas exports, a massive public relations campaign through media was essential to operations concerning the heightened conflict in August 2008. In this chapter, I will discuss reports from Russia Today, a state-owned Russian media source that broadcasts on satellite television and via the internet. Launched in December 2005, Russia Today is broadcast around the world in the English language. I have chosen to analyze this source due to its being a far-reaching voice of the Russian government, which is highly
representative of the Kremlin’s perspective, as it is owned by Russia’s state news agency, 
*RIA Novosti*. Russia Today is easily accessible as past shows are archived both on its 
website and on Youtube.com. 71This work is based upon transcriptions of four Russia 
Today programs that I viewed during the five days of the conflict. These first five days 
were chosen for the purpose of getting a sense of how the initial, crucial impressions of 
the war were broadcast. The transcriptions have been made from programs found on 
youtube.com and accessed since my return from Georgia. My methodology consists of 
making full transcriptions from the chosen programs. I then analyze and discuss the 
content of the broadcasts, considering that content in terms of the factual origins for what 
was happening in reality during that time. Following the analysis of the official Russian 
narrative of what was taking place in Georgia in early August, I then briefly examine the 
Georgian media since the late years of Shevardnadze’s presidency with an emphasis on a 
particular Georgian medium’s response to early August. Based upon my findings, I argue 
that, during the August 2008 war, Russia used its voluminous media bullhorn as an 
instrument of legitimizing disproportionate violence in Georgia’s separatist regions, 
resulting in ethnic cleansing and a dire humanitarian crisis in the country it had invaded. 
Through the use of incendiary language, state-run Russian media sources have framed the 
August war in their own terms, which do not correspond with findings of international 
human rights organizations given limited access to the Upper Kartli.

71 According to William Dunbar, a British citizen who worked for Russia Today until his reports on the 
bombings of Gori by Russian planes were not allowed to air, Russia Today is actually less bombastic with 
its rhetoric against Georgia and the backing it receives from the West.
The State of State Run Media

After centuries of strict press control by czarist directives, Soviet times followed with even stricter media subjugation to the state.\textsuperscript{72} Under Stalin, during the relative thaw of the Khrushchev years, through the renewed oppressions of Brezhnev, and later until the days of Gorbachev, books, newspapers, films, and other forms of media, were strictly censored by the state. Russian media sources began to enjoy freedoms never before known on such a scale during Gorbachev’s \textit{glasnost} and Yeltsin’s continued thaw at the beginning of his presidency. The end of communism in Russia saw a new generation of journalists far less constrained than before, and this afforded them the occasion to try to voice concerns which were politically taboo to the previous regime.\textsuperscript{73} In fact, during the First Chechen War (1994-1996),\textsuperscript{74} the Russian news media was very effective in showing the horrors of war and in questioning the very reasons for war’s existence during this period.

As the Yeltsin era was nearing its close, censorship in the Russian media was sharply increasing.\textsuperscript{75} Much of this new control was ushered in after the highly controversial Moscow apartment bombings took place in August 1999, just a few months prior to the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s presidency. Reasons from the government for tightening control included: “protecting the work of the security forces in combating terrorist activity, prohibiting the spread of terrorist ‘propaganda,’ and protecting the


\textsuperscript{74} The First Chechen War was a devastating defeat for the Russian government, whose overwhelming military force was stopped by Chechen guerilla warfare. Boris Yeltsin signed a cease fire in 1996 that helped to create a de facto independent Republic of Chechnya.

\textsuperscript{75} Simons, 190
victims of terrorist acts (and their families).”\textsuperscript{76} The media began to pass along news from security services that incited large scale fear and panic throughout Russia. According to Greg Simons, a specialist of Eurasian studies, and Dmitry Strovsky, a journalism historian, “The enemy was defined as being ruthless, Islamic and probably originating somewhere in the Caucasus region.”\textsuperscript{77} Such a vague impression has been used to paint the entire Caucasus as a terrorist breeding ground, and has deep, historical roots in the Russian media. At least since the 19\textsuperscript{th} century writings of Pushkin, Caucasian highlanders have been firmly planted in Russian mythology as “by nature violent or corrupt,”\textsuperscript{78} through such stories as “Prisoner of the Caucasus.” In the latest film version of that same story, which was released in 1996 as \textit{Prisoner of the Mountains}, Chechen characters were played by Georgian actors speaking the Georgian language, a further blurring of the line between Chechen/Georgian/Caucasian/Criminal/Terrorist.

Framing Chechens as enemy terrorists gave Vladimir Putin a firm reason to present himself, a man from relative obscurity, as a tough and decisive leader who could bring Russia out of the demeaning and tumultuous 1990s. During the 2000 Russian presidential election, as Putin had already been chosen by Yeltsin to be his successor, Putin’s campaign threatened a nonreciprocal response to “acts of provocation by the mass media.”\textsuperscript{79} Another time while being questioned, Putin became irritated and said, “If one follows the letter of the law, we would have shut you down a long time ago.”\textsuperscript{80} Later in 2000, the Duma passed the Doctrine of Information Security, which officially presented

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Simons and Strovsky,
\textsuperscript{80} Sawka, 106.
the Kremlin’s position on what would be tolerated from the Russian media. This position defined a new association between government and media which made clear the hierarchy of Russian government policy over the media. Putin’s public relations man during those early days, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, put it clearly when he said, “When a nation mobilizes its forces to solve some task, [this] imposes obligations on everyone, including the media.”

Putin’s grip on media has tightened further as he has fulfilled his warning to journalist by using tax laws and anti-corruption sweeps to secure major media outlets for his cronies or directly to the state. The most popular TV stations are those that have the farthest reach, and those are all under Putin’s control. The state run Channel 1 has followed the Kremlin’s lead more directly since 2000, and in January 2000, less than one year after Putin came to power, the popular independent channel NTV was taken over by Kremlin subsidiary and petro giant Gazprom. Since 2001, the Kremlin has controlled Russian television airwaves, the most accessible and trusted media source in Russia.

The two most well-known, remaining independent voices in the Russian media are Echo Moskvi (Echo Moscow) and Novaya Gazyeta (New Newspaper). However, both are in constant fear of being shut down, as they are under constant scrutiny and threat from the government. In late August, Echo’s editor-in-chief, Aleksei Vendiktov, was called to a meeting with Putin and thirty-five of Russia’s leading media executives in Sochi, on the Black Sea. The meeting is an annual event that is used to present Putin’s

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81 Simons, 202.
82 Ibid.
views on the media in a direct and face to face manner. At one point, Putin turned to Vendiktov and lambasted him in front of his peers, accusing *Echo* of incorrectly covering the war in Georgia while reading from a dossier of transcripts of perceived errors. According to a Washington Post reporter, one participant reported the following as said by Putin to Vendiktov: “I’m not interested in who said these things. You are responsible for everything that goes on that radio station. I don’t know who they are, but I know who you are.” As for *Novaya Gazeta*, perhaps it received its greatest warning on October 7, 2006, Putin’s birthday, when reporter Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in the elevator of her apartment building. Politkovskaya is best remembered for her dedication to reporting on the war in Chechnya in a stringently critical manner against the Kremlin. Her murderers were determined to be two Chechen brothers, but many inside and outside of Russia think that the real culprit, or at least the one who ordered the murder, is still at large.

Just as Politkovskaya questioned the use of violence in Chechnya, so too did a French journalist at a press conference after Putin received the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor award from Jacques Chirac in France in September 2006. The reporter asked if by attempting to eradicate terrorism in Chechnya, Putin would eradicate the civilian population. Perhaps taken off guard by such a tough question that could likely never be asked in the Russian media climate, Putin responded, “If you want to become an Islamic fundamentalist and be circumcised, come to Moscow. We have good specialists. I can recommend one for the operation. He’ll make sure nothing grows back.” Viewing the

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84 Pan
85 Particularly recommended among Politkovskaya’s works is *A Dirty War: a Russian reporter in Chechnya.*
video footage of this press conference, the French official sitting next to Putin appears quite confused or incensed by the answer to this question.  

Greatly contrasting with the aforementioned independent media outlets, Russia Today is owned by the state-run news organization RIA-Novosti and is the first all-digital Russian TV channel. This English language service started broadcasting in late 2005, and can be found live online on both its website and through a youtube.com feed. Russia Today won an award from the Association of International Broadcasting’s 2007 Media Excellence Awards for a report on the Chernobyl disaster, however; critics have been quick to comment on the channel’s appearing as a mouthpiece of the Kremlin. Russia Today is very inviting to watch, due to clear graphics from its being digital and an appearance very similar to the BBC (its English speaking anchors and reporters sound as if they were possibly raised in London). At least on a surface level, these features make Russia Today very appealing to those who do not understand the Russian language well.

**A Look at Russia Today**

This section examines transcripts from four episodes of Russia Today that aired during August 7 through August 10, which will be subsequently analyzed and discussed:

*Georgia Starts War on South Ossetia*, Broadcast on August 7, 2008

The first broadcast, from August 8, 2008, shows a correspondent named Mikhail Lebedev embedded 300 meters inside the “border” between Georgia and South Ossetia, where invading Georgian troops have met resistance. He tells of how he is lying on the

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ground face to face with Georgian troops, and that shooting is going on around him. Then Lebedev says that he has spoken to Russian peacekeepers and that they had lost some of their men. Abruptly, the transmission goes out from on the ground in the battle. The host of the program says, “I think we may have lost you. Thank you very much for that update.” Then a Russian analyst only identified as Peter is shown in the studio with the main host. It can be easily discerned that his voice is dubbed into English. He says that it is interesting that Lebedev mentioned that Russian peacekeepers were under attack. He goes on to say that peacekeepers have been injured and possibly killed and that “Georgians are not taking any prisoners.”

The studio host comments on how the Russian government is concerned about what is going on and that they will take action to “avert further bloodshed and return peace to the region.” She then quotes the Co-Chairman of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Joint Control Commission, Yuri Popov, who says the following:

I class Georgia’s actions as treacherous. I can’t understand how it is possible to trust Georgian promises and assurances after that. In this case, we see open aggression against South Ossetia. It is important to hold Georgia back from any further escalation of the conflict.

The banner across much of the bottom of the screen reads: WAR LOOMING?

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87 The Joint Control Commission is a peacekeeping force represented by Russia’s North Ossetian Republic, Russia, South Ossetia, and Georgia. It was created when Georgia was forced to sign a treaty in 1992 to prevent further destruction in its Upper Kartli area.
Georgian Aggression Continues, Broadcast on August 8, 2008

The broadcast begins by telling that Georgian troops had entered South Ossetia. A banner at the bottom of the screen says, AT LEAST 1400 DEAD AFTER MORE THAN 24 HOURS OF WAR. Scenes of non-descript buildings in a haze were then shown smoking, with the sounds of shells exploding in the distance. Because of all the smoke, it is difficult to tell where the city is located. Suddenly, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili comes on the screen speaking loudly. The English language dub over shows Saakashvili saying, “As the Commander in Chief of the Georgian forces, I gave a very painful order that we will not respond even to intensive fire from the South Ossetian side.”

The screen goes black except for surface to air fire through the shell shocked Caucasus night. The next person who speaks is Boris Malakhov, the Deputy Spokesman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, from Moscow. “Georgian forces have launched a huge, treacherous attack on the city of Tskhinvali. It is now clear why Georgia had continuously avoided signing a legally-binding agreement on the non-use of force with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but there is still time to avert more bloodshed and casualties, including civilian casualties,” he said.

After several minutes more of tank and aircraft footage which could have belonged to either side, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin comes on saying, “It is a shame that during the opening of the Olympics, when all weapons are traditionally silent, we have the reverse. On the day of the Olympic opening, the Georgian leadership has taken very aggressive steps against South Ossetia and virtually started hostilities using heavy weaponry, artillery, tanks … And there are victims … people killed and wounded.
And there are also casualties among Russian peacekeepers, and this is very sad. This makes us uneasy, and it will of course draw a reciprocal action. We’d like it that in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, that such actions get relevant judgment and that we all take measures to stop it ...”

This was followed by some herky-jerky scenes of men running while the sound of firing goes on in the background, a man is shown wounded, yet calm, in a room with several people. We are then shown a small crowd gathered and an old woman in distress very briefly. This scene is interrupted by an address by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, who states the following, “The situation has reached the point where Georgian peacekeepers have been shooting at Russian peacekeepers. Now children, women, old people … all die in South Ossetia. Most of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. According to the Constitution, I, as the President of the Russian Federation must protect the lives and the dignity of the Russian citizens, no matter where they are. Those responsible for the deaths of our citizens will be punished.” The large banner at the bottom of the screen now reads: RUSSIAN MILITARY ENTER OUTSKIRTS OF TSKHINVALI TO REINFORCE PEACE.

*Saakashvili’s Crimes in South Ossetia*, broadcast August 9, 2008

The news anchor reports that, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry (RFM), the Russian military has moved into Tskhinvali to protect civilians. The RFM has received word from the Georgian side that Georgia will cease military action, but that so far has not happened, according to Russian peacekeepers. The South Ossetian “capital” has been cleared of Georgian troops, but the situation is still dire, she continues, as people are without food, water, and electricity. Hundreds are said to be trapped underneath
rubble. According to witnesses, Georgians used cluster bombs against civilian targets and burned people alive in a church. Officials say that more than 2000 have been killed in the assault. It is noted that Russia continues to send humanitarian aid from Vladikavkaz, as 3000 people are set to be evacuated from the conflict zone. The newscast switches to a reporter who tells more about the humanitarian aid just mentioned. She tells how North Ossetian men want to help open the humanitarian corridor for those civilians trapped and injured, which are numbered in the thousands.

The reporter then introduces the next segment by saying that there are officially three sides in the conflict: Georgia, South Ossetia, and Russia, but that “some would tell you” that there is another “invisible party” to the recent violence, that being the United States. This has been an introduction for an American who is said to have “fled the fighting” to “give a message for George Bush.” Joel Mathis from Florida is then interviewed. Mr. Mathis is said to have been vacationing in South Ossetia with his family when Georgia launched its assault. Mr. Mathis is a middle aged man wearing a beach shirt with a cap that has the word RUSSIA emblazoned across it in big letters. The following is a transcript of the dialogue:

Correspondent: Mr. Mathis, you just told me that your wife, originally from South Ossetia, and your five year old daughter were in South Ossetia when Georgia launched its military offensive on this republic. What thoughts were going through your head when you heard about this?
Mathis: My wife said that she would be safe in Java.\textsuperscript{88} I wanted her to leave, but she said that nothing would happen in Java. The next morning I got a call from my wife who said that a Georgian plane had bombed Java. This happened about two-hundred meters from her parents’ home. She grabbed my daughter and got some of the neighbors’ kids and they hopped in the car and left. She called me while on the way and told me that they were terrified. When my daughter hears an airplane now, she is afraid. After she got to the border, she dropped the kids off and went back to get her parents.

Correspondent: You’ve told me that you’ve been in this region many times. You know about all these simmering tensions that have been simmering for so long. Have you ever thought that this could boil into such destruction on both sides?

On the screen during this time, women who only could be identified as “likely from the Caucasus” become hysterical and comfort one another. One gets visibly upset with the camera before the scene changes.

Mathis: No I haven’t. I thought that since the US has been supporting Georgia, there would be a peaceful resolution, but what has happened there is not just war; it’s war crimes. George Bush and Saakashvili should answer to the crimes that have been committed. The killing of innocent people, the running over of graves, running over of women and children with tanks, throwing grenades into cellars to kill innocent people … War is supposed to be military versus military. Georgians are committing genocide.

\textsuperscript{88} Java, a small town, is the second largest municipality in the Tskhinvali region.
Correspondent: You mention Saakashvili, who has called for the US to help Georgia. Do you want Washington to step in?

Mathis: I urge every American who may be watching to call their representatives and George Bush and tell them that America does not need to intervene in this war. America needs to stop supporting Georgia. What Saakashvili is doing is no better than Saddam Hussein did, and if George Bush has supported Georgia is doing this, he’s no better than Hussein.

Correspondent: And do you have any friends and relatives who are still trapped in South Ossetia?

Mathis: We got a call this morning that my wife’s relative was killed two days ago by a tank. The problem is that there is not only the war, but that Georgia has cut off the water supply a month ago. The Georgian tanks are running over graves. This is more horrible than anything since Hitler annihilated the Jews in Germany.

Correspondent: We certainly hope that your family will be ok in South Ossetia. This was Mr. Mathis, an American from South Ossetia, whose wife and child happened to be in this region on the same day when Georgian launched its military offensive.

Genocide: Georgia is Killing Innocent Ossetian People, broadcast August 10, 2008

On August 10, Russia Today reports with another large banner across the screen that this time read, GENOCIDE. The segment opens up with a Russian pensioner commenting on how terrible the pictures from South Ossetia were that she had seen on Russian television. This is juxtaposed by her surprise that Western media had been
covering the story in a more pro-Georgian manner, and that she was shocked that such coverage could take place in modern times.

Next, an attractive blond woman with an English surname gives a list of places claimed by Georgians to have been bombed by Russian jets, and follows that the Russian Defense Ministry denies that any Georgian cities were bombed by their planes. The banner reads RUSSIA DENIES BOMBING GEORGIAN CITIES OUTSIDE CONFLICT ZONE. The news host then informs her viewers that “several earlier reports by the Georgian side have been proved wrong,” just seconds before announcing that two Russian journalists had been wounded in the fighting. By this time, the large banner again reads simply, GENOCIDE.

The next segment of this newscast is a chronology of what has happened thus far (as of August 10) since the early evening of August 7. According to Russia Today, this conflict began within a continuum of violence perpetrated by Georgia. The timeline starts with Saakashvili announcing that Georgia will “lay down its weapons” as the Olympic Games were set to begin. However, just as Ossetians were peacefully preparing to sleep, Georgians reneged on their earlier agreement and started firing on them with missiles. The voice over then talks about how Georgian forces had destroyed the local hospital, burned the university, and shot up the city center in Tskhinvali quite badly. Then after mentioning a humanitarian corridor being opened by Saakashvili, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tells how a humanitarian convoy was bombed by Georgian planes. The voice over comes back to mention that Tskhinvali was in ruins and that Ossetians had announced that Georgians were committing genocide. According to the voice, at that point, just over 24 hours into the conflict, more than 1500 Ossetian civilians
had been killed. Then the news anchor comes back on to tell that all hospitals had been destroyed in Tskhinvali, “killing many children.” She then goes on to tell how Georgian soldiers were throwing grenades into basements where women and children were hiding and adjusts the death toll in South Ossetia to 2000, seeming to give a sense of a rapidly rising death toll that can be hardly kept up with by those covering the story.

**Analysis of Broadcasts**

Such broadcasts imply that this war was a part of a mythic struggle of good versus evil, and that evil Georgia had invaded the peaceful South Ossetians who were being saved by the international law-abiding Russians, protectors and defenders of those who would be overrun by another’s military might. According to the Russian state, through Russia Today, Georgians led by their lying and treacherous president and with the assistance of George Bush’s United States, were unleashing dark forces that were bent on overrunning ordinary Ossetians. Later during evacuation in Armenia, I heard some Armenians say with emotion that they had seen and heard enough from the Russian news to convince them that Georgians were doing horrendous things and that the bombing and invasion of other parts of Georgia were justified. Accordingly, two themes stand out as particularly salient from the Russia Today broadcasts I have viewed: the treacherous suddenness of the Georgian invasion that began the war and the massive, unrestrained scale of Georgia’s genocidal aggression.

From the earliest broadcast I have looked at, Russia Today shows that war has replaced a peace that had existed at some undisclosed time in South Ossetia and that Georgia is guilty of escalating the conflict. Furthermore, WAR LOOMING scrolling across the bottom of the screen distinguishes some time in the future when something
referred to as “war” is likely to begin. Such a distinction downplays what has already occurred. Accordingly, it is the Russian government that is presented as concerned with stability in the region. This does not acknowledge the constant violence that has threatened this breakaway area each year at least since 1991. A June 2007 report from the International Crisis Group (ICG) shows that hostilities have been especially heightened since the summer of 2004:

Repeated small incidents could easily trigger a larger confrontation. Crimes, detentions, shootings and exchanges of fire have become routine. Killings, kidnappings, shelling, mine explosions and other ceasefire violations also occur, as do direct confrontations between armed personnel, especially in the warmer months.\(^89\)

In September 2005, two months after several peace proposals from the Georgian side, Russian heavy weaponry controlled by Ossetians was evident in Tskhinvali. During this same time, three shells exploded near Tskhinvali injuring 10 people. Georgia blamed Russia; Russia and South Ossetian leadership blamed Georgia. Also, during the days leading up to the Russian and Georgian convergence in Upper Kartli this August, shelling was constant despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers. According to the recently displaced Manana Magradze, “There wasn’t a single quiet day in August. We would wake up to the sound of explosions or shots. [It is said that] the war has started now, but we’ve been living with war for many years.”\(^90\) The peace that Russia Today’s screen banner mentioned as being reinforced on the outskirts of Tskhinvali must have been

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retroactive far into the past. Seeking acknowledgement of this long-standing violence, Georgia has filed a brief before the International Court of Justice charging Russia with directing and abetting ethnic cleansing of Georgians from South Ossetia and Abkhazia from 1990 to the present.

As seen in the Russia Today broadcasts, Georgia’s involvement in the “new” war is as the aggressor and perpetrator of what would equate to some of the most heinous war crimes of history, all under the motivation of genocidal terrorism. The analyst on the show titled Georgia Starts War on South Ossetia portrays Georgian forces as something akin to mindless killing machines by saying that they are “taking no prisoners.” No eyewitness sources are mentioned to confirm such volatile information. What is given is a quote from the Russian co-chairman of the OSCE Joint Control Commission in South Ossetia, an organization that is heavily weighted toward the Ossetian/Russian side and has been in place throughout 16 of the 17 years of the conflict. The co-chairman’s comments seem to have two points: 1) Georgia is committing acts of treacherous, open aggression against South Ossetians and 2) They must be stopped. The Georgian side is not given a chance to respond, and such comments made by the OSCE representative give credence to unspecified counter-aggression from the Russian side.

It is the second piece from August 8 that accelerates the rhetoric of Georgian aggression to levels reminiscent of Bosnia, Rwanda, and even Nazi atrocities during the Second World War. The combination of a screen banner that tells of 1400 killed, smoke coming from buildings, and loud artillery fire, is shown directly before a sound bite of Saakashvili’s announcing that he had given an order not to respond to even the heaviest fire from the Ossetian side. It was after this speech when Russian troop movements were
detected at the Roki Tunnel, which goes under the Caucasus mountain range, connecting Russia to Georgia in Upper Kartli. According to Saakashvili and others, it was the movement of the elite Russian 58th Army towards Georgian territory that triggered the Georgian response to push past the regional capital of Tskhinvali and cut off the Russian troops in a narrow valley, which would be the last place likely to stop them from possibly driving all the way into Tbilisi and overthrowing the government. The Georgian side was not allowed to express this on Russia Today as Saakashvili later did on CNN, BBC, and other networks, and as a result, the ceasefire appeared to be a deceitful broken promise followed by despicable acts of torture and murder, since the Russian media had deeply emplaced their story early, when their journalists were the loudest and most numerous available on the ground.91

Such acts began to be specifically described in the segment titled “Saakashvili’s Crimes in South Ossetia.” When reporting that according to witnesses Georgians had bombed civilians with cluster bombs and burned people alive in a church, Russia Today reporters never mention if these reports have been confirmed true -- they only convey hearsay. Also unconfirmed at the time were the 2000 people reported dead in Tskhinvali. According to Thomas Goltz, a specialist of the Caucasus, these 2000 Ossetians who had illegally been given Russian passports were the main rationale for the Russian invasion, as it said, to protect Russian citizens. However, “the bodies of these alleged victims of Georgian atrocities have yet to be displayed; the morgue in Tskhinvali confirmed that it

91 Personal interview with former Russia Today Tbilisi Correspondent William Dunbar via email, October 25/26, 2008.
had only processed some 44 corpses for burial during the same period\textsuperscript{92},” writes Goltz. Furthermore, Russian and South Ossetian leaders have not allowed EU Observers into the conflict zone to see evidence of the alleged genocide. Also unconfirmed before being broadcast were the allegations by an American married to a South Ossetian woman saying that tanks had run over innocent women, children, and Ossetian graves, and that Georgian grenades had been thrown into cellars sheltering civilians. His blatant charges of Georgians’ committing genocide as atrocious as the Nazi Holocaust and Saakashvili being as evil as Saddam Hussein were unquestioned and accepted as fact by those who broadcast this rhetoric. The extent to which the alleged Georgian genocide was being committed, according to Russia Today, included the almost total destruction of Tskhinvali, including the university and all hospitals. Again, all of these events were reported as fact with no mention of confirmation.

According to the broadcasts discussed here, and many others from Russia Today\textsuperscript{93} and other Russian government controlled media sources, the political agenda of the Russian government/media conglomerate is to create a mythological narrative of conflict in Upper Kartli. Whatever the intention of the conglomerate, taking time to confirm the reports of genocide and treachery would not have allowed the Kremlin perspective that Georgian had started this “new” war to take hold as a part of the conflict narrative. Russia Today and its Russian language sister stations created reality, or the commonly accepted


\textsuperscript{93} One example of this is from a Russia Today report during the early days of the conflict that said “black” Americans, possibly mercenaries, were among the Georgian soldiers killed in the conflict zone. The broadcaster said that tests would be made to confirm this. Such claims could arouse fear in Russians, Ossetians, and other peoples of the North Caucasus based on both racism and ingrained Cold War fears of American aggression and imperialism. With the assistance of foreign journalists in the Caucasus, I have found no confirmations or repudiations of this story.
perception of it, by setting the narrative hinging on Georgian aggression against a peaceful population of mainly Russian citizens. Mythology must not be proven true, only believed. Until the Russian government and the South Ossetian leadership provide legitimate evidence for the claims made of Georgian troops’ committing genocide in the conflict zone during those few days in early August 2008, it will seem that the news reports of such unsubstantiated claims were, at best, indirect contributors of atrocities soon thereafter committed against ethnic Georgians, and at worst, invitations for South Ossetians and other groups from the North Caucasus to perpetrate heinous human rights abuses which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of all Georgians from what has historically been a sizeable portion of the Georgian heartland.

**Georgian Media and Perspectives on the Events of August**

In accordance with analyzing the Russian media perspective, it is important to examine the dominant Georgian viewpoint through media to be consistent with the theme of competing narratives and to refrain from presenting the Russian government as the only barrier to free speech within these narratives. Georgian law established a largely free media with laws passed from 1991 and 1995\(^4\). Despite the rampant corruption of the Eduard Shevardnadze presidency, Georgian media remained uncensored by the government, and free speech, for the most part, was allowed until 2001. One television channel even freely broadcast a critical and demeaning portrait of Shevardnadze as a bumbling idiot in an animated program called “Dardubala.” Eventually, however, Shevarnadze would crack down on Rustavi 2, the station airing “Dardubala”, and other shows critical of his administration, in 2001. Also during that year, Giorgi Sanaia, a

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\(^4\) The Law of the Press and Other Mass Media was passed in August 1991, and the Georgian Constitution was passed in August 1995.
popular investigative journalist at Rustavi 2 was found dead in his apartment. These events sparked mass protests that led to Rustavi 2’s being allowed to continue its open style of television journalism.

Rustavi 2 was also instrumental in bringing about the Rose Revolution, as it was used to encourage protests against Shevardnadze’s government in late 2004. This station has continued to be the main mouthpiece for Mikhail Saakashvili since his rise to power, as it has continued to be largely supportive of his policies. According to Lincoln A. Mitchell, a scholar of Georgia at Columbia University, the Georgian state is now “semi-authoritarian”, something indicated quite prominently in its curtailment of press freedoms.95 The events of November 7, 2007, are the principal example of this.96 On this date, riot police using tear gas and truncheons violently suppressed a mass demonstration in central Tbilisi. Hundreds were injured, and independent TV stations were closed under the auspices of emergency rule. The Imedi television studios were stormed as masked police destroyed equipment while forcing employees and guests onto the floor.97 Prior to its being taken off the air, Imedi was the most popular news channel in Georgia.98

The Georgian governmental elite perspective of August 2008’s events, as seen through its tightly controlled news media, appears to be somewhat different from the perspectives of at least some of those who were on the ground in Upper Kartli during this time. A representative from the independent channel Kavkasia has stated that her

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
organization withheld information that contradicted the Georgian government story of the situation in Tskhinvali on August 10 in fear of political harassment. Such self-censorship can be even more effective for a government than direct censorship, since the “choice” to censor by the self-censoring entity might distract from the unseen pressure of more forceful media control. Furthermore, Saakashvili took all Russian television channels off of the air in Georgia shortly after his troops’ incursion into Upper Kartli, and they only returned in late fall of the same year.

**Conclusion**

Looking critically at the consolidation of government dominance over the most widely accessed media in both Russia and Georgia shows a most disturbing trend. Despite Putin’s comment that “We have never had freedom of speech in Russia, so I don’t really understand what could be stifled,” the 1990s did bring greater access to media which was openly critical of the Russian government. After the Moscow apartment bombings of 1999, which gave pretext for beginning what is often called the “Second Chechen War” and helped propel Putin to his first electoral victory, widely viewed independent news outlets, such as NTV, spoke openly about evidence of a FSB plot to bomb innocent Russian civilians while they slept and blame the bombings on Chechens to legitimize a follow up war to regain power over the then quasi-independent land. Within three years, NTV was seized by Kremlin and turned over to a Kremlin friendly official. NTV’s opinions have noticeably shifted since its takeover in 2002.

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100 The post-Soviet version of the KGB

According to journalist and best-selling author David Remnick, Echo Moscow is known to have shocked many by airing the Georgian side during the recent war. One of *Echo Moskvi*'s main contributors, Yulia Latynina spoke of the official Russian media’s treatment of the same subject:

For example, if Russia drops a rocket on Georgia from a plane, the report will talk about the size of the hole and whether or not the Georgians dug the hole themselves and all sorts of other nonsense. Suddenly, you are talking about holes and not about whether Russia is trying to scare the hell out of the Republic of Georgia and other such ‘enemies.’ And television makes up things, too, about supposed enemies like Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia. Everyone is our enemy. Who is a good guy? Andorra? Iran? All of it is a diversion from real political information and thought.\textsuperscript{102}

On the Georgian side, there are many parallels with tightening media control in Russia. For all of the tensions between Putin/Medvedev and Saakashvili, there are some obvious similarities between the two. Both have built more autocratic societies in the name of order and recovery, and one chief method of doing so has been the governmental takeover of media. These leaders have both used media to appeal to outsiders by presenting themselves as protectors/victims. According to most Georgians, the combination of the media war plus the overwhelming size and power of the Russian military encouraged and allowed ethnic cleansing to take place on their sovereign territory. Whereas the Georgian government’s use of media censorship was effective in

\textsuperscript{102} Remnick
blocking out the Russian version of what was transpiring during the escalation of conflict, it was the Russian media’s unconfirmed reports that were used to justify what is commonly believed to be a disproportionate military response against Georgia and the terrorizing of a civilian population, which was facilitated by an at least apathetic Russian military.
CHAPTER 4: INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AS AN EXTERNALLY PLACED CANCER

After seven weeks in my Peace Corps training village, I was sent to Tskhaltubo, a town in the western part of Georgia, to live and work for the remainder of my service. Tskhaltubo was a former resort rich in radio carbonate mineral springs where people from all over the Soviet world would come to have various ailments cured. The town of 20,000 received around 125,000 visitors per year during the late Soviet years, according to a tourist brochure from this time. When I moved there, all but one of its over 20 sanatoria were overflowing with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia. Crimes rates were extremely high in this area, likely at least partially due to the thick sense of despair that hung over the town whose population had doubled after ethnic cleansing from Abkhazia. Several acquaintances in Tbilisi asked me in a state of confusion, “You live there? That’s the narcotics and crime capital of Georgia! Why would Peace Corps have sent you there?”

The son of my teaching counterpart in Tskhaltubo worked at one of the sanatoria, and his father and I were invited there to observe a folk dance group of IDP children. We were seated in the ballroom of what was once a grand building, complete with marble statues and elaborate winding staircases. Some food and wine were brought out to honor the American celebrity in town. I had already gotten used to the elaborate and ritualistic toasting ceremony which was associated with drinking Georgian wine and eating food, but on this occasion I was moved to tears and introspection. Usually the toasts were standard: peace, ancestors, friendship, parents, children, guests, nature, Georgia, etc …
The director of the dance group, who had been a well known director in Sokhumi, Abkhazia’s main city, raised his glass to make a toast to the children of the man who took the life of his son in the war. He wished them the best life possible, something that could not be afforded to his son, including peace. I saw no malice whatsoever in this man’s expression, nor did I hear any sarcasm in his voice. Despite eight years of displacement and the loss of his son, this man was able to say such things with sincerity. Such stories may bode well for future reconciliation and return for IDPs.

Fast forward to 2008. Near Gori, in a village called Tkviavi, a journalist interviewed a Georgian family that had recently moved back to the village after fleeing the carnage of the August war to the Georgian controlled area of their country. The head of the family peered at his burnt shell of a house that once stood with sheltering walls. The rest of the family was gathered to be interviewed in the cattle shed, which had been converted to their living quarters since their return. The family matron made stove-baked cornbread while a grandson sat on a sofa, their only salvageable furniture from the house looted and burned by Russians and Ossetians. “We will freeze this winter,” said a family member in almost a whisper. The bundle of firewood in the yard delivered by a non-governmental organization may have possibly lasted for three weeks.

Both of these snapshots portray the plight of Georgian IDPs through different lenses. For families such as the one in the latter story, life changed dramatically and somewhat unexpectedly over the course of a few days in August 2008. Their villages were in Georgian government controlled territory when the Georgian military moved into Georgia’s separatist-controlled Tskhinvali region on the night of August 7/8. Over the

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next several days, the disproportionately large Russian military took control of this region, all of Abkhazia, plus a buffering swath of land surrounding both of these areas, in the process bombing military and civilian targets throughout the country. During this invasion and subsequent occupation, when Russian troops poured in as a vanguard for irregulars from the North Caucasus (mainly Cossacks, North Ossetians, and Chechens) and Ossetians from Upper Kartli, tens of thousands of ethnic Georgian residents were forced to flee to Georgian controlled territory because of the rape, murder, torture, looting, and burning of houses.

Within a discussion of narratives and the symbolic and practical political power that they often wield in situations of ongoing war, there is a danger of diluting the narratives of the displaced when they are filtered many times over through media and government officials, which are sometimes one in the same. Realizing that an academic observer from an outside culture is another kind of filter, I have chosen to highlight the stories of IDPs here whom I have personally interviewed and IDPs which have been interviewed through a multi-NGO project. Continuing this discussion without the perspectives of these stakeholders in the constant war in Georgia would deny an alternative to the firmly emplaced narrative of states and quasi-states, challenging the dominant legitimacy of state violence.

Exile: Established 1991

_Homesickness is when you miss even the mud in your garden_

_...even the mud in your garden._

Temuri, an IDP from Upper Barghebi living in Poti

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104 A Heavy Burden, 58
According to a 2003 report sanctioned by several international organizations, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)\textsuperscript{105}, since Georgia’s ethno-territorial wars of the 1990s, 264,000 Georgians had been displaced from the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflict zones (252,000 from Abkhazia/12,000 from South Ossetia). In 2003, 6% of Georgia’s population was considered internally displaced from the aforementioned conflicts. At the height of displacement from the August 2008 War, the UN estimated 129,000 newly displaced for a total of 393,000 since Georgia’s independence in 1991. This has occurred within the borders of a country smaller than South Carolina, but with less habitable land due to rocky, high mountain terrain.

This chapter will highlight the narratives of those who live in the effects of the war waged against Georgia since the early 1990s. These testimonies show the violence of poverty and displacement that have been used to make Georgia destabilized and politically vulnerable. These IDPs have largely been caught in a cruel sort of limbo as many of them are still not properly integrated into their local communities and suffering from stigma attached to their being long term outsiders there. The first section gives a statistical background into the situation of Georgian IDPs. Subsequently, the second section delves into the testimonies of IDPs focusing on identity, community integration, and return and reconciliation.

When discussing the implications of displaced persons in Georgia it is important to understand that this has not been only a national problem. The distribution of IDPs in the regions of Georgia is far from balanced, as one moves east from Western Georgia, the

proportion of IDPs to host population decreases. This can be telling for the purpose of understanding the possible political pressures that can be directed towards particular local governments. Municipalities in Samegrelo, including Zugdidi, Martvili, Khobi, and Senaki, are the most highly saturated with IDPs. The populations of the former three settlements contain over 50% IDPs. Seventy-three percent of IDPs live in urban areas.\textsuperscript{106}

Since ethnic Georgians have been exiled and prevented from returning to their homelands, the conditions of displacement have most often been quite harsh. In fact, while visiting Georgia in 2005, the UN Secretary-General’s Representative on the Human Rights of IDPs, Walter Kalin, announced that he was “shocked by the misery” in which many of Georgia’s IDPs lived\textsuperscript{107}. Some internally displaced families have been able to pull together and eke out semi-comfortable lives due to financial aid from well-off family members or the good fortune of a well-paying job, but this is generally not the case for the plurality of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are housed in collective centers across Georgia. These Georgian IDPs live in former hotels and public buildings, some families crammed together with other families in the same few rooms. Such collective centers are generally considered to be insufficient for habitation due to their usual leaky roofs, missing window panes, and walls in need of repair. These living spaces also generally contain little or no space for growing food and provide substandard access to water supply, telephones, bathrooms, and kitchens. According to a Georgian government profile of IDPs made in 2004, 70% of collective centers do not meet minimum living standards according to access to clean water, safe electric systems, and adequate

insulation.\textsuperscript{108} As of August 1, 2002, 42\% of Georgia’s IDPs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia were living in these kinds of collective centers\textsuperscript{109}. Such statistics are often difficult to track, however, since some IDPs maintain collective center dwellings while owning private residences. This is especially important in Tbilisi or resort areas where such accommodations have potential for significant market value.

Georgian IDPs live on state allowances of 14 GEL per month, which is the equivalent of almost ten dollars, but over the years of displacement, they have sometimes been given humanitarian assistance disproportionate to other poverty-stricken Georgians. These non-IDP Georgians have sometimes been resentful of this “special treatment,” something which may possibly be exacerbated by most IDPs from Abkhazia being from the ethnic Georgian subgroup called Megrelian. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), ten years following the beginning of significant displacement in Georgia, said that “the scale of humanitarian needs may have actually increased, rather than declined.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{Identity Issues}

Unanimously, all IDPs I have encountered consider themselves first and foremost Georgians. Despite being labeled by many non-IDP Georgians simply as Megrelebi, the Georgian term for one whose surname comes from the western region of Samegrelo and who may or may not speak the Megrelian language, IDPs from Abkhazia identify


\textsuperscript{109} IDP collective centers are mainly old schools, hotels, or other public buildings that house displaced persons.

primarily as Georgians. Beyond this, some acknowledge that they are Megrelebi. “Just as all Georgians from areas outside of Tbilisi speak of themselves as from whatever regions they come, we do the same. Someone from Kakheti\footnote{The easternmost region of Georgia.} will not cease to call himself a Kakheli when he moves to Tbilisi or some other part of the country,” a middle-aged IDP woman named Eliso\footnote{Named changed for confidentiality.} told me. Often, even someone whose grandfather came from a certain region will be described as from that region. Eliso reminded me that, “However, it is important to know that no matter what region one’s name comes from, he is Georgian, and that goes for all IDPs I know too.”

Perhaps it is the choice of which political term to describe those displaced from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region which sheds the most light on generational differences regarding identity among IDPs. During a focus group of IDPs from Abkhazia between the ages of 15 and 18 which was held a few hours before the August 2008 war began, I discovered a Georgian word to identify IDPs that I had never previously heard; that word was devnili. The word for IDP I had absorbed into my vocabulary while learning Georgian was ltolvili. Since I learned Georgian often without the use of a dictionary, while figuring out vocabulary using context, ltolvili became synonymous with those I lived among and taught in Tskhaltubo. It was only during the aforementioned focus group when I discovered that ltolvili literally translates to “refugee.” The young people I sat with referred to themselves as devnilebi and felt it important to relay that they were not refugees, displaced from their nation-states; they were displaced within their nation-states, and felt that how they identified themselves was a valuable part of telling their stories. Perhaps this was an attempt to find a term other than ltolvili to more
accurately correspond with “internally displaced person.” The change in terminology could also be due to the stigma placed on the word *litolvili*. This word had too often slipped off of the tongues of non-IDP Georgians in a gruff and negative tone. I recently discovered that the word *devnili* is associated with the Georgian verb *devna*, which means, “to persecute.” Therefore, *devnili* refers to “the persecuted.”

An IDP male named Engurdaleuli from the Gali region of Abkhazia, who is now living in a rented flat in Zugdidi, tells his story of displacement in *A Heavy Burden: Internally Displaced in Georgia*. This book is the result of a project called IDP Voices, which was coordinated primarily by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). At least prior to the August 2008 war, Engurdaleuli made trips back and forth to visit his parents who were living in the Gali district. He tells how he feels “split in two” based upon how he is viewed by those Georgians displaced in Zugdidi and, in contrast, by those in his home village. “Often when we go to Abkhazia, those who live there say that the Zugdidians have come. Once, my relative and I had an argument over this,” said Engurdaleuli. “There must be a reason for this, but I don’t know why they did so.” He goes on to say that treatment is similar in Zugdidi, where IDPs there call him a “Galian.” There is a stigma attached to those who choose to live in Gali under the authority of the Abkhaz de facto government, which requires Georgian residents to pay a special tax of 100 kilos of hazelnuts,¹¹³ and in the midst of harassment from other Abkhaz groups that openly extort from ethnic Georgians. “The world where the returnees live is one of obedience to the rules there. They have the

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¹¹³ Hazlenuts are the major crop in Gali.
attitude of slaves towards life generally. Those who are on this side are like the rebels, because there is more freedom here.”

While Engurdaleuli is in Abkhazia, he is under constant threat of being harassed by local authorities, especially being near the age of military service. Once he was leaving Abkhazia with only his birth certificate for official identification. When questioned by the Abkhaz border guard about his nationality, Engurdaleuli had to think quickly to consider his options for getting out of this situation safely. “If I tell them I am 100% Georgian, they’ll find faults with me, and I might get arrested. I thought it would be better to tell them I was Megrelian.” Megrelians are somehow more tolerated than non-Megrelian Georgians, perhaps because non-Megrelian Georgians are associated with Tbilisi and the government there, considered to be the greatest threat to Abkhaz independence. The border guard gave the birth certificate back to Engurdaleuli laughing and waving him along. “That was the time I felt like a coward. I couldn’t say anything else about my nationality,” said Engurdaleuli.

This is an example of the identity conflicts that may arise concerning the situation of the Georgian IDP, and especially those from Abkhazia, who often have the option of calling themselves Megrelian. Engurdaleuli feels himself “100% Georgian” but must deny this part of his identity in return for his perceived safety. After having lived through the IDP experience, which could serve as a bolsterer of national identity, it seems that Engurdaleuli has an especially difficult time not saying that he is Georgian. The psychological effects of an IDP’s being forced to repeatedly deny his or her own valued identity could be quite negative on that person’s well-being. Eliso, an IDP from Gali living in Zugdidi, told me a story that illustrates this situation:
Most Georgians treat us very warmly when they encounter us and find out that we are IDPs. Ten years ago though, near metro Delisi, there were a lot of IDPS who were selling things there – many who had left Abkhazia before us. Naturally we started speaking Meqreuli with them. A young man walked up and very aggressively said, “Why are you speaking Meqreuli?” The woman we were with gave him a very literal explanation of how we come from this region where this particular language is spoken, but that no matter what we are Georgians. I said to this young man, “For a long time we have been in Abkhazia and not even the Abkhaz have questioned why we speak whatever language we speak. Therefore why do you ask us this here?” He left.

Eliso’s story could easily be repeated by other IDPs who identify as Georgians and Megrelians because of the apparent animosity that exists in some non-IDP Georgians. It seems that, for many non-IDs, a stereotypical IDP is a spoiled, government-dependent, often-conniving, Megrelian. Part of this stereotype is backed up by the reputation of Megrelians as shrewd business-people and politicians, something which contrasts with the more pastoral and relaxed nature of most Georgians.

Stories such as the one a woman in the Khashuri district once told me do not help the relations of IDPs with local populations. Anna, a homemaker, talked of a harvest season during the rough times of the mid-1990s. She said that IDPs who were living 30 minutes down the road in Borjomi would come into the local villages during this season of plenty and beg for food. Locals would feel sorry for them and give them portions of their harvests to feed the starving children they mentioned having at home. Anna said that hundreds of kilos were likely taken from the surrounding villages during that year. It was later discovered that these IDPs were taking what was given to them and selling it at the Borjomi market, a market where products sold for larger than normal prices because it
was in a mountainous river gorge. “They did this despite having access to humanitarian aid that the rest of us were not privileged to. I think they likely sold that too. Containers of cooking oil, pasta, and flour could be seen in markets with “Donated by the People of the USA” stamped visibly. Georgian culture is still very much a word-of-mouth culture; so stories such as these, especially if they are being told in all of the villages where this occurred, likely spread far and quickly. Something that happens in a place that is not used to events outside of the norm of daily and seasonal routines is something worth telling over and over to anyone who will listen. Anna also spoke of the former village school where she attended. “That school was so lovely down there near the river with the converging mountains in the background. It was landscaped in such a way that cars would slow down on the highway to get a look at it. We were all so happy to call it our school,” Anna said. “That was before the ltolvilebi came and destroyed the place. You can see it now with all of the trees cut down around it and much of it gutted for scrap to sell.” The school has been occupied by IDPs from Abkhazia since 1993 or 1994; she can’t remember. From looking at this building now, it is difficult to tell that it was a building that had given any community a sense of pride. Despite the outpouring of sympathy and assistance from locals, this school is symbolic of the despair and depression that IDPs have brought with them, almost as carriers of a plague or as exiles cursed by some black magic spell from far away. It is fitting that this family lives near the highway and wedged between the railroad tracks and the river, as they are marginalized in their adopted village.

Temuri is a 55 year-old male IDP named from Upper Barghebi in Abkhazia, who now lives in Poti. He lost a member of every generation of his family in the early 1990s
phase of the conflict as they were killed and burnt. Temuri believes that most non-IDP Georgians view IDPs in a negative manner. He has witnessed an attitude by natives of Poti which mirrors those expressed in the Khashuri region and elsewhere: “You’re being helped and you still complain.” Temuri also shares his memories of the early autumn of 1997, when fruit generally hangs plentifully off of the vine. But during this particular autumn, there was no fruit to be reached or even leaves to be seen.

My friends in Tbilisi asked me how it was in Zugdidi. I said: “IDPs have eaten almost everything there.” They wondered why. I said, “I was walking along the street. Someone was standing in his own garden eating an unripe fig. A neighbor called to him: That fig isn’t ripe yet. The answer came back: When it’s ripe, the IDPs will be quick to eat it.” Later this became a joke.

Despite such reasons behind the lack of acceptance by locals towards IDPs, Temuri laments the fact that many did not take the time to try to place themselves in the perspective of those who had been forced out of their homeland.

Of those IDP interviews to which I have had access, none mentioned a total lack of help from other Georgians. In fact, several told stories of how local Georgians shared the very same food that they had been saving for their children. Teah, from Gali and now living in a collective center in Poti, remembers “how the Tbilisians, just ordinary people with whom we were not familiar at all, were coming [to the station], bringing food and clothes. Some of them invited people to their house to spend the night.” Therefore, the situation of community integration from the perspective of those interviewed in this work is a rather complex subject.
Community Integration

When Teah first returned to her home village in Gali after being jostled around from several locations in Georgia, several locations in Russia, and Kiev, Ukraine, she became emotionally distraught over the scene where she had last seen her grandmother. “And then … to my great shame, I must admit that I began to hate everyone who participated in this war – both Abkhazians and Georgians,” Teah exclaimed. Both her grandparents died there in their village after staying behind during the fighting of September 1993. “We couldn’t even bury them humanely [cries]. Both of them were 60 years old. They were killed for nothing – just because they were Georgians.”

But now Teah works as a trainer for the NRC, and often travels to Abkhazia for her job. She tells of how she has learned to collectively forgive the Abkhaz as a people, especially after learning that many of them have also suffered similarly to the way in which she has. “There are Abkhazians in the place where I work,” she said. “We have fine relations. They know about my tragedy and I know about the tragedies they have endured. Only after talking about our own tragedies did we truly learn about each other and start to love each other. It took time to trust each other.” She discussed the way in which they had struggled to come to terms with their differences. “In the evening, after training, we sat together, simply talking, and the Abkhazians mentioned this issue [of hostile attitudes between Georgian and Abkhazians] and said: ‘How tired we are of all this! We do not want this war.’

As mentioned in chapter 2 of this work, there has been a long history of Georgians and Abkhaz working and living together. Based upon this knowledge, it is safe to say that, in the neighborly context of the Caucasus, they have shared each others joys
and tragedies over the centuries. At least until the August 2008 war, commemorations such as weddings and funerals were attended jointly by Abkhaz and ethnic Georgians. A 21 year-old IDP named Peter, whose family home in Gali was burnt down during the war in the early 1990s and now lives in Zugdidi, talks about a wedding feast he recently attended in Abkhazia. There were Abkhaz there, and no tension was evident among the partygoers. Peter says that when a wedding guest crosses the Enguri Bridge, the southern administrative border between Abkhazia and Georgia, the host of the party can arrange to have that guest allowed into Abkhazia, even if that guest is an IDP. Eliso from Gali, as mentioned earlier, also speaks of attending weddings of Abkhaz. “We go because we have respect for those we visit, and because we see it as imperative for us to do such things to have good relations and to live peacefully. In that way, every Georgian who attends an Abkhaz wedding is a little diplomat.” Engurdeleuli mentioned returning to Abkhazia to celebrate Easter in 2007. Even during this most important Georgian religious holiday when the dead are honored in relation to Christ’s resurrection from death, Georgian and Abkhaz alike enjoyed the holiday. “We brought food and drink and had great fun. It was as if we dispelled the sadness of that place,” he said.

Based upon the focus group of IDP youth, young IDPs from Abkhazia who have no personal memories of where they were born or where their parents come from, tend to differ from the older generations on the subject of return. All still hope for the guaranteed safety to return and reclaim the property that is rightfully and legally theirs, but all felt that they had much more promise of opportunity in quickly developing Tbilisi, and did not seem ready to accept the challenge of rebuilding their homeland from its currently underdeveloped state. However, all were content to go “home” to Abkhazia for the
summers. This is understandable considering their lives thus far having mainly been lived in collective centers. When opportunity finally comes to a place that has been so long without it, it must be difficult to imagine moving to a conflict zone that is familiar only through the memories constructed through others. The focus group was a collection of bright and personable young women who were happy to talk to a foreigner interested in their lives. Adults seemed to be suffering a bit from interview fatigue and were less willing to speak according their children, as they had been asked questions about their living conditions and the brutality committed against them during the 1992-1994 phase of the war in Georgia. Young men were nowhere in sight.

The August 2008 phase of the ongoing post-Soviet conflict in Georgia and its additional 129,000 IDPs further illuminates Georgia’s critical situation as a result of the latest round of ethnic cleansing. That number decreases each week now as the displaced continue to return to where their homes once stood, in most cases. Despite the 4.5 billion dollars pledged at the recent international donor conference for Georgia, it is yet to be seen how this money will be spent. There are great concerns that a large portion of the funds will be diverted into rebuilding the Georgian military rather than truly taking care of those who have been most closely affected by the ongoing conflict. Many questions remain to be answered, especially concerning a possible scramble for relief funds if only a small portion of the donor funds go to assist IDPs. Furthermore, just as local Georgians assisted the “old” IDPs during the 1990s, many of the old IDPs gave to “new” IDPs. As was the case for locals, this is likely to wear off soon for the long displaced, and perhaps it already has. How will relations between those various groups contribute to or detract from the continued building of democracy and economic development in Georgia? Will
the competition for resources have far-reaching political consequences? By listening to the voices of the displaced, there is far more to gain than only a simple understanding of the perspectives of these marginalized people, though these carry much obvious value in understanding displacement. There is enlightenment in the increased exposure to the complexities of internal displacement, as seen in the stories of those mentioned here. Perhaps most saliently for this work, these narratives add value by displaying the effects of legitimized state violence when framed within the context of other narratives in constant conditions of war. These effects embed crucial reminders of consequences of constant war that often go unnoticed in the melodrama of bombastic political rhetoric.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

If there has been a battle of narratives to define the conflict between Georgia and its breakaway territories backed by Russia, then who is the winner of such a battle? This is of course dependent upon who is asked. The image of Caucasians as bandits and kidnappers from those considered to be the best of Russian writers has endured the recent centuries and have emplaced such images firmly in the mind of those whom have exposure to Russian literature, most especially, of course, the Russians. I believe that this constructed regional character has especially affected the Georgians and Chechens, perhaps the most rebellious of the peoples of the Caucasus to Russian control, whereas Ossetians and Abkhazians have been especially conciliatory to Russians including during the Bolshevik invasions and at the beginning of the 1990s. Considering the latest thrust of violence in August 2008, President Saakashvili certainly used his public relations approach to media, through his tireless appearances speaking in English on Western TV broadcasts, to spread the alarm of Russian aggression, and perhaps this even assisted with preserving his nation’s sovereignty over most of its territory. Most importantly though, the Russian government, with its tightly-controlled media apparatus, has been quite successful in emplacing the narrative of Georgian aggression against Tskhinvali. This can be seen in the early broadcasts of Russian state-run TV stations like Russia Today that either knowingly or unknowingly incited ethnic cleansing by, at best, announcing hearsay of brutal Georgian attacks against a civilian population of Ossetians and portraying Saakashvili as an evil mastermind on genocide. Since August 2008, Russia has continued to define the way in which the war has been discussed by focusing on who “started the war,” rather than dealing with what lead up to this particular flare up in an on-going post-
Soviet war against a rebellious state. On a global media level, the ethnic cleansing committed by Ossetians and peoples of the North Caucasus against Georgian civilians of all ages and the newly displaced persons whose homes were burned during the summer of 2008 is seldom discussed, whereas major media outlets such as the New York Times and the BBC have given fairly constant coverage to the question of who started the war, therefore emphasizing the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali since this event was what first brought serious international attention to what is known now to most of the world as South Ossetia. Such a non-contextualized narrative misrepresents the situation in Georgia and ignores the history of relations between the various peoples of Georgia and the impact of imperial Russia by whatever name it has been called. When taking a look at recent Russian history, it is difficult to see how Russia, run by the same man that has presided over the bulk of the Chechen War of the late 20th and early 21st century, could portray itself as a defender of civilians of an ethnic minority aggressed by a majority ethnic group within the same state. It is also ironic that Medvedev claims his responsibility to protect Russian citizens wherever they may be, when his own government security forces torture people and burn them from their homes on his own territory in Chechnya, simply for being suspected of terrorism. Resulting from Russia’s bombing campaigns, Chechnya has recently been the most landmine stricken country in the world, plagued by environmental disaster, and Chechen homes are burned if they

are suspected as locations where “terrorists” may have once lived.\textsuperscript{117} Left unchecked, fear and suspicion of terrorism can destroy entire societies, and where Russia is concerned, those societies that appear in question are those that stand in its way of regional domination.

A glaring difference between Russia’s support for the breakaway governments in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia and their campaigns in Chechnya, which have left as many as 200,000 civilians dead, is that the separatists Russia supports are attempting to breakaway from a rival state. The Russian government pursues policies that favor another state’s minorities, but not their own minorities in their quests for independence. In fact, since Russia recognized the Sokhumi and Tskhinvali governments on August 26, areas of the North Caucasus such as Ingushetia and Dagestan have become increasingly eruptive in violence\textsuperscript{118}, something predicted by Russian news commentator Ivan Sukhov back in August.\textsuperscript{119} Violence in Ingushetia in particular is increasing, partly due to a long standing feud between Ingush and North Ossetians from a territorial conflict in 1992 which was lost by the Ingush. Accordingly, the Ingush government claims that 21,000 Ingush are still displaced from North Ossetia alone.\textsuperscript{120} Even outside of the Caucasus, in Tatarstan, local

\textsuperscript{116} Chechnya habitat “ravaged by war.” Retrieved September 28, 2008, from BBC. Website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5108416.stm
\textsuperscript{117} Chivers
ethnic Tatars have been perhaps emboldened by ethnic particularism shown to the Abkhaz and Ossetians, as they have challenged Moscow’s authority in the area by considering legislative changes in family, education, and language policies. Russia has been walking a precarious tightrope since giving support to Georgia’s separatist movements beginning in the 1990s, but might have felt like its position was one of strength in the North Caucasus when it recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nation-states. Part of this strength might lie in the lack of steps taken by the West to hold Russia responsible for its brutal subjugation of its own citizens in the North Caucasus, something which has co-opted this broad, politically-constructed term called “The War on Terror” as justification for terrorizing civilians in Chechnya and elsewhere.

Watching these aforementioned broadcast images and trusting in the voice of Russia Today, it is easily believable that Georgians were committing genocide from these well-crafted television reports. However, it makes little sense for a nation so desperately seeking NATO and future EU membership (possibly for its very survival) in such an overt manner to attempt to liquidate a minority ethnic group with Russian tanks, bombers, and news crews poised to observe and descend upon the mainly Ossetian territory. For such a gross violation of human rights to be overlooked in today’s globally pervasive media climate is almost incomprehensible. And what of the thousands of Ossetians who live in Georgia proper with no problems? How does this fit with the supposed “ethnic” conflict? Also, fortunately, Russia’s history in the Caucasus exists as a record to be examined and scrutinized. This in itself raises questions concerning the

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122 Dunbar interview
Russian media’s assertions of something as extreme as genocide. It was the Kremlin’s media which reported the loudest from the beginning of the August war, therefore spreading the initial information that Georgia had started this conflict on August 7 by invading its own territory, which had been more so in Russia’s control for 16 years. Georgia’s story, that it moved its military into the Tskhinvali region to protect Georgian villages that were being shelled, had little chance to be heard and verified against a Russian media giant.

The Russian media’s legitimizing, and even inciting, violence goes beyond their sprawling GENOCIDE across television screens around the world. Anna Neistat, who led Human Rights Watch’s (HRW) investigative team into the Tskhinvali region less than a week after the conflict began, plainly said that “the torching of homes in [Georgian] villages is in some ways a result of the massive Russia propaganda machine which constantly repeats claims of genocide and exaggerates the casualties. That is then used to justify retribution.” Casualty figures are extremely important pieces of information partially because of their potential to incite further violence in the form of revenge. This is particularly important in the Caucasus, where blood feuds and reprisal killings have long been woven into the cultural fabric of most (if not all) peoples. Russia’s manipulation of widely reported and unconfirmed facts, such as “2,000 Ossetians killed by Georgians,” is evidence enough to determine that the Russian government bears some responsibility for inciting ethnic cleansing as those Hutus who took to the airwaves in

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124 Paula Garb’s 1995 article titled *The Return of Refugees Viewed through the Prism of Blood Revenge* that appeared in *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* (Vol. 13, Number 2, Autumn, pp. 41-44) is an excellent source for looking at blood revenge in the Caucasus, especially in Georgia (Abkhazia).
Rwanda asking their ethnic brethren to “kill the Tutsi cockroaches.”\textsuperscript{125} An example: a 47 year old Ossetian living near a majority ethnic Georgian village was interviewed as his Georgian neighbors’ houses burned, "It's not they, it is we who will erase them from the face of earth."\textsuperscript{126}

Furthermore, reports that Tskhinvali had been wiped off of the map were upheld by Russia Today and others. In fact, the Deputy Head of Russia’s General Staff, Col. Gen. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, said on August 12 that “Tskhinvali doesn’t exist; it’s like Stalingrad was after the war.”\textsuperscript{127} Again, Anna Neistat from HRW comments that “the damage [in Tskhinvali] is significant … But I would not describe it as a city razed to the ground.”\textsuperscript{128} Tom Lasseter, a reporter for McClatchy Newspapers, the US’s second largest newspaper company, toured Tskhinvali around the same time as Neistat. His unofficial visit there without Russian escorts revealed that, despite the overwhelming rhetoric from Moscow and Ossetian leadership, almost all buildings appeared to be left standing, not denying heavy damage in some places.\textsuperscript{129} Again, such reports made early on by Kremlin media shaped the first impressions of the conflict, setting a tone for Russian propagandist dominance. Beyond that, no proper assessment has been allowed in the conflict zone to determine who did what damage to which buildings.

\textsuperscript{125} Gourevitch, Phillip. (1998) We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda. New York: Farrar, 1998.
The situation in Georgia remains tenuous as there are now more Russian troops in Abkhazia and Upper Kartli than at any time since the end of the Soviet Union. Even the most optimistic Georgians who were looking towards some type of peace settlement have begun to doubt that these lands historically connected to Georgia will ever renew those same relations because of Russia’s military hand and the bitter perception left especially from Georgian militarism in the early 1990s and in August 2008. IDPs are still numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and the future of further economic and political reform in Georgia is far from certain. Many specialists of the Caucasus and Georgians alike say that without Abkhazia and with Russia continually threatening Tbilisi from such close range in Upper Kartli, Georgia is on the verge of a return to severe economic decline. President Saakashvili will likely face a toughening opposition as 2009 approaches, as the politically-numbing effect of August has already worn off. It is highly unlikely that Saakashvili will be able to overcome his image in the region as being autocratic, a military aggressor, and a puppet of the West, all traits that make him, and a Georgia led by him, nearly impossible to diplomatically win over the people of the conflict zones. In this way, the Georgian President is being more closely identified with deposed former President Gamsakhurdia, something that does not bode well for the current office-holder. At this point, it seems that separatist governments, aided by Russia, have won the war of emplacing narratives in the Caucasus, and to a large extent, beyond. Without an unforeseen major world event, the miracle of a statesman and diplomat of the most awe-inspiring proportions rising quickly in the Georgian political scene, or the separatist zones realizing en masse that their cultures are threatened by continued Russification, as has happened in the North Caucasus, methods of violence seem destined
to flourish in Georgia’s relations with the separatist governments of Ossetians and Abkhaz and an increasingly authoritarian Russia.
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