“Frozen Conflict” in Paradise: Origins of the Struggle for Abkhazia

Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

This Master’s thesis examines the question of separatism in Abkhazia, a breakaway republic of Georgia. Paying particular attention to the role of Georgia and Russia in shaping the fate of Abkhazia, this thesis is concerned with identifying the origins of the now “frozen conflict” which now exists in the autonomous republic, which scholars have described as being in a state of constitutional limbo. In offering an explanation for how a series of diplomatic failures led to the outbreak of war following the fall of the Soviet Union, the thesis places particular emphasis on five critical themes in the history of Abkhazia. They are as follows: demographic shift in the republic; the legitimate, yet conflicting, interests of the Russians, Georgians, and Abkhaz in the republic and how the triangular nature of the relationship between these three parties; competing or overlapping claims to Abkhaz territory; the question of nationalism; and the importance of specific events and personalities. The thesis is divided into five distinct chapters to offer readers a basic background in Abkhaz history and to highlight key events and personalities in the region’s past. The first chapter is concerned with the ancient and pre-Russian history of Abkhazia and Georgia; the second chapter focuses on Transcaucasia under the Russian Empire and Georgia’s brief period of independence from Russia in the early twentieth century; the third chapter is a narrative of the region in the Soviet period; the fourth chapter examines the post-Soviet period and the outbreak and consequences of the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia; and, finally, the fifth chapter follows post-war Abkhaz, Georgian, and Russian relations, culminating in the August 2008 war fought between the Georgians and Russians over South Ossetia.
Dedication

This one goes out to the ones I love: my mother, father, sister, and Shelley. Thank you for your love and support.
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Introduction

War gripped the Caucasus on 14 August 1992 when Georgian forces entered the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi to quell the Abkhaz government’s demands for independence from Georgia. Between the December 1991 fall of the Soviet Union and the outbreak of war less than a year later, fire had been exchanged between Abkhaz rebels seeking separation from Georgia’s jurisdiction and federal troops whose objective was to uphold independent Georgia’s territorial integrity. However, in sending troops to Abkhazia, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze was responding to the destruction of railway bridges linking Batumi, Poti and Sukhumi with Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. He was also reacting to Abkhaz separatists’ taking of hostages, many of whom occupied important positions in the Georgian government.

After two years of war, won by the Abkhazians with Russian assistance, the fighting has settled into an unresolved “frozen conflict.” The perceived need for war between the two sides resulted from these specific events in 1992, but the war in reality arose out of a diplomatic quagmire between Tbilisi and Sukhumi that developed over the complicated course of the region’s history. But where do the origins of this now “frozen conflict” between Tbilisi and Sukhumi lie? How can they be explained? The following thesis will explain the historical struggle for Abkhazia, examining five overarching themes and key events that led to the outbreak of war in 1992 while offering a possible explanation for the degeneration of Abkhaz-Georgian relations that has persisted to the present day.

Before all the fighting, Abkhazia was a part of the world renowned for its beautiful subtropical climate, its booming tourism industry along the Black Sea coast and prosperous export of tea and exotic fruits. The Abkhazians are a people known for their rich and beautiful
culture and fascinating history as well as their perplexing language that has captivated linguists for centuries. But the modern concept of Abkhazia has changed along with the political climate within the borders of this autonomous republic of Georgia. The mention of Abkhazia in today's world conjures up images of a hotly contested territory that was scene to a devastating war of separatism in the 1990s.

But why is Abkhazia important to regional or global geopolitics in today's world? First of all, Abkhazia occupies a territory upon which a battle for influence in being waged. Russia, which recognizes Abkhazia as an independent state, wishes to keep the region under its influence. Abkhazia is entirely situated along the strategically-vital Black Sea coast, a body of water Russia does not want to fall into the hands of a regional rival such as Turkey, Georgia, Ukraine, or even Bulgaria. In addition, the United States has heavily invested in independent Georgia in order to expand its regional influence and desires to incorporate its Transcaucasian partner into NATO. But the problem of Georgia’s territorial integrity, complicated by both Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s claims to statehood, remains among its greatest obstacles to finalizing an agreement with the military alliance. Abkhazia’s claim to independence following the fall of the Soviet Union also challenged some of the basic definitions of statehood under modern international law. Chechnya failed in its struggle to separate from Russia, whereas Kosovo was successful in seeking separation from Serbia. The frozen conflict in Abkhazia, especially in light of the Chechens’ failure and the Kosovars’ success, forces us to consider what exactly defines a state under contemporary norms of international law.

The events in Abkhazia also form a part of the larger process of the dissolution of the communist world. Since the fall of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, a number of similar frozen conflicts have developed in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. But this phenomenon is not unique to the territory of the former USSR. We see similar developments in Kosovo, Macedonia and Vojvodina, which were all part of communist Yugoslavia. Noting that Abkhazia is not the only frozen conflict in the region indicates that the
isolated events of the conflict have greater resonance in a world where peoples are still trying to carve out space for themselves.

The events of the 1980s and 1990s that ultimately led to the outbreak of war in 1992 and Abkhazia’s current state of international limbo can be explained by five factors. The first of them is a demographic shift. Since the time of tsarist Russian hegemony in Abkhazia, the indigenous population has been drastically reduced to a dismal seventeen percent of the overall population of the republic. It is due to this sharp decline in percentage over a relatively brief period of time (less than two centuries) that by the beginning of the final decade of the twentieth century the Abkhazians began to view themselves as in danger of ultimate extermination, or at least assimilation, at the hands of an outside party, in this case, the Georgians.

But it is not the Georgians alone who have dominated Abkhazia. It is crucial to note that the Russians have also played a significant role in shaping the fate of the republic. All three parties, the Abkhaz, Georgians and Russians, have legitimate, yet conflicting, goals in the region. The relationship between these three parties is also a triangular one. That is to say that throughout history, the actions of any one party involved has affected the other two; and if any two parties acted on a shared interest in the region, then the third was affected by their combined actions.

Although there are three significant parties involved in the struggle for Abkhazia, there has also been a significant degree of outside interference from more significant players such as the Americans (especially in today’s political atmosphere where Georgia desperately seeks an invitation to join NATO as a means of cooperation with the West to break from Russia’s influence once and for all), the Persians and the Turks. But the Armenians, the Azeris and various North Caucasian peoples have also played a role in shaping the complicated history of the region.

Third, competing or overlapping claims to territory have also complicated matters in this triangular relationship. Is Abkhazia distinctively Abkhaz? Is it Georgian? Is it Russian? Or even North Caucasian? In order to understand the situation in Abkhazia, it is crucial to ask where the
republic fits in the world- not only geographically, but historically, linguistically, culturally and so on.

Fourth, matters in Abkhazia were further complicated by the question of nationalism. The development of national identity in the region is a fairly modern process that has its roots in the nineteenth century, when Abkhazia was under the control of the Russian Empire. During this period, intellectuals throughout the empire debated what it means to be a nation. Throughout the course of the twentieth century, Soviet ideology led to the formal creation of nations based on a variety of factors including (but not limited to) economic concerns, language, national consciousness, and territory. But the idea of Soviet nation building was plagued by what Yuri Slezkine calls a sense of “chronic ethnophilia” and resulted in demands for a separate literary language, press and education system by a prodigious amount of non-Russian Soviet peoples. Slezkine explains that “every Soviet child inherited his nationality at birth,” and indeed this Soviet-era idea of separation along ethnic lines had great repercussions for Abkhazia and its relationship with Georgia and Russia.

And finally, the importance of specific events and personalities in the development of the current political situation should not be overlooked. War erupted in post-Soviet Abkhazia as a result of the decisions of key political Abkhaz and Georgian politicians. For example, the relationship between Abkhaz president Vladislav Ardzinba and his Georgian counterpart, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, differed greatly from that of Ardinba and Gamsakhurdia’s successor, Eduard Shevardnadze. Could war have been avoided had Gamsakhurdia stayed in power in Tbilisi? Or could Ardzinba and Shevardnadze have reached a compromise of sorts to avoid a future frozen conflict? Understanding a conflict as difficult as the struggle for Abkhazia is no simple task, but these five themes must be kept in mind while searching for clarification of how exactly Abkhazia was transformed from mid-twentieth century Soviet paradise into the lawless, war-plagued diplomatic quagmire that it was in the 1990s.

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2 Ibid. 444.
Chapter 1: The Dawn of the Abkhaz Nation?

The Abkhazians: Who are They?

Before examining the region’s significance in today’s political atmosphere, it is necessary to clarify who the Abkhazians are and how their complex history has shaped them as a people. Precisely defining the origins of the Abkhaz people is fairly problematic, as very few reliable sources exist from ancient times and “scholars who are concerned with this problem certify that until the nineteenth century there were no trustworthy sources to approximately define the number and nationality of the population, including aboriginal Abkhazians.”

Several mutually exclusive hypotheses exist that attempt to explain the origin of the Abkhazians. One theory has them migrating to their current homeland from Egypt, another derives the Abkhazians as aboriginal to the North Caucasus (Abkhazians call themselves Apsua and historical records indicate that the Apsua were in fact a North Caucasian tribe not indigenous to Transcaucasia), and others claim that they migrated to what is now Abkhazia from Asia Minor. But Georgian scholar I.A. Javakhishvili argues that regardless of the question of their indigeneity to the region, Abkhazians, once a migratory people, have been living on the territory of what we now call Abkhazia for centuries. Javakhishvili argues that “in the distant past, Abkhazians along with Adygheans came from the south to western Transcaucasia, and from there resettled in the North Caucasus. Only in the first centuries of the Common Era did the ancestors of the Abkhazians return to Transcaucasia and occupy the territory of modern Abkhazia.”

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3 Grigoriy Platonovich Lezhava. *Abkhaziia: Anatomiia mezhnatsional’noi napriazhennosti* (Moscow, Russia: Tsentr po izucheniiu mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii, 1999), 18.
Regardless of their origin, the Abkhazians eventually became known to history through the Greeks and Romans, both of whom conquered parts of the region now known as Transcaucasia. It is through their sources that we know that ancient Abkhaz tribes have dwelt on or near the territory of modern Abkhazia since the first century AD and frequently battled with the Byzantines, Romans, and Sasanid Persians. Missionaries preached Byzantine Orthodox Christianity to the Abkhazians as far back as the third century and were successful in converting most of the Abkhazians by the sixth. During the seventh century, Arabs and Byzantines struggled for control of a largely unorganized Abkhazia. However, by the 730s all the ancient Abkhaz tribes were consolidated into one state and united under Prince Leon I with their capital at Anakopia on the site of contemporary New Athos to the north of the modern Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi. Over the following centuries, the Abkhaz kingdom became extremely powerful and extended to the modern largely Armenian-populated town of Akhalkalaki in southern Georgia. But Abkhazians were not the only people in this kingdom. Historical evidence suggests that the Abkhaz principality was formed as a union between both Abkhaz and Kartvelian (a South Caucasian ethnic group that includes Georgians, Laz, Mingrelians and Svan) peoples with an Abkhaz minority and Kartvelian majority, comprised mostly of Laz (an ethnic group bearing similarities to the Georgians), Mingrelians and Svans (subethnic groups of the Georgians).

Around the tenth century the Abkhazians began to develop and intensify their ties with Georgia and eventually the language of the liturgy in Abkhazia was changed from Greek to Georgian. By the eleventh century all Georgian lands ranging from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea were united under one ruler as the Kingdom of Abkhazeti-Kartli. As the Kingdom expanded, bringing more Kartvelians under its rule, this state came to be known as Sakartvelo which remains the Georgian word for “Georgia” today. By the beginning of the twelfth century the city of Kutaisi in what is now Georgia served as the capital of both the Abkhazians and Kartvelians, with Tbilisi becoming the capital only after the expulsion of the Arabs in 1122. Both Georgian and Abkhaz scholars agree that the Abkhazians took a leading role in the unification of the country and the language of the ancestors of the contemporary Abkhazians was widely-known and
respected throughout the country. The great Kartvelian Queen Tamar even gave her son Giorgi the second name Lasha, which she noted is translated from the language of the Abkhazians' ancestors as “enlightener of the universe.”

Ties between the Abkhazians and Kartvelians were evident even to foreign travelers passing through the region. Iakub Ibn Al-Lakh Al-Rumi Al-Khamavi, an Arab scholar, writer, historian and geographer who lived in the latter half of the twelfth and early half of the thirteenth century noted that “Abkhazia is a region of Georgia, where Christian Georgians reside.” The evident ties noticed by Ibn Al-Lakh Al-Rumi Al-Khamavi are preserved today in many place names in contemporary Abkhazia which have their root in both Georgian and Svan (another Kartvelian language). For example the word Sukhumi comes from the Svan Tskhumi; Gagra comes from the adjectival form of the word for “nut” in Svan. The famous resort in Abkhazia known as Bichvinta comes from the Georgian pichvi (pine), the village of Achandra comes from the Georgian chadari (maple) and Mukhuri takes its name from the Georgian mukha (oak).

Evidence suggesting deep historical ties between Abkhazians and Georgians is overwhelming. However, some contemporary scholars, such as Svetlana Chervonnaya, utilize this convention for contemporary political ends. She suggests that there should be no doubt that Abkhazia, based on its history, is an inalienable part of Georgia. Chervonnaya uses a shared history between the Abkhaz and Kartvelians to argue that “the right of Abkhazians to consider this land to be their historical homeland- the ancient arena of their ethnogenesis- is beyond all question. However, any ideas that their ancestors were the only inhabitants of this land, and that there are no ancient roots of Georgian culture here, are absolutely erroneous and illusory… So, not only by virtue of historico-cultural association, but also ethnodemographically this land should be considered part of Georgia.” Given the substantial evidence to suggest a deep cultural and historical relationship between Abkhazians and Georgians, Chervonnaya’s argument that

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6 Bidzina Savaneli. Abkhaziia: istoriia i sovremennost’ (Tbilisi, Georgia: B. Savaneli, 2007), 7.
7 Ibid.
Abkhazia should be considered a part of Georgia possess a significant amount of validity. It is worth noting that the modern-day mistrust and distance between the Georgians and Abkhazians is a primarily recent development, as Abkhaz-Georgian relations have been clouded by the political developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But how did this once amicable relationship between these two neighbors become so complicated so as to bring us to the current situation?

**Division of the Kingdom**

The kingdom of the Abkhazians and Kartvelians peacefully prospered until the thirteenth century, when it was destroyed by the invading Mongols in 1236. The destruction of the kingdom led to the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia for the first time since unification in 978 and Abkhazia found itself as an independent state. By the fourteenth century the Abkhazians had established trading posts with the Genoese, whose mercantile activity in the region lasted until the fifteenth century. During this time the Abkhazians witnessed a flourishing of material culture and significant wealth but in the fifteenth century the kingdom was weakened by feudal wars, disintegrated into smaller kingdoms, and was fought over by Turkey and Iran from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Matters between the Abkhazians and Kartvelians were further complicated by the annexation of Abkhazia into the Ottoman Empire by the Turks in 1578. It was during this time that an estimated twenty percent of the Abkhaz population was converted to Sunni Islam and fell under Ottoman influence. But not even the introduction of Islam broke ties between the Kartvelians and the Abkhazians as Islam was not accepted by all and did not significantly affect Abkhaz culture or national self-consciousness. There was not even a mosque in Sukhumi for a half century after falling to the Turks and the ensuing conversion. The Kartvelians remained a generally Christian people although the Turks were successful in converting a significant portion of the population of Adjara in southwestern Georgia to Islam. In the seventeenth century, war broke out between Abkhazians and Mingrelians, a Kartvelian ethnic group inhabiting the western
part of contemporary Georgia. Mingrelian victory in the war brought about the reunification of the Abkhazians with the Kartvelians as one kingdom which lasted until the Russian conquest of the Caucasus.

**How Did Russia Get Involved in Transcaucasia?**

Ancient ties between the Georgians and the Abkhazians are evident, but how exactly did Russia enter the fray? Certain Russian sources argue that Georgians came to rely on Russia during the time of Ivan the Terrible, who ruled from 1547 to his death in 1584, as, in the words of I.M. Strizhova and N.M. Terekhova, “for the unfortunate Georgians there was only one hope for salvation - Russia.”

Georgia was surrounded by hostile neighboring powers and could not, even from the sixteenth century, defend itself from constant invasion by the Persians and Turks. Georgian chronicles support this theory and contain stories of how “Cossacks from the Don and even the Dnieper came to their assistance.” Due to their overwhelming need after a series of devastating attacks and occupations by the Turks and Persians during the sixteenth century, the Georgians received a constant supply of money, teachers, priests and religious books from their neighbors to the north.

Russia took a legitimate interest in Transcaucasia for a variety of reasons. The first is economic, as Transcaucasia, which is situated between numerous great powers, has been a valuable trade route throughout its history. Another reason is Russia’s great power rivalry with Persia and Turkey. Russia could not afford losing the strategically-vital Transcaucasia to a rival empire which also possessed pretensions to the region. And, last, there was also a religious factor. Russia saw itself as the protector of the Christian population of the Caucasus from the hostile advances of the Persians and Turks. And St. Petersburg was able to capitalize on the combination of these factors to legitimize its claims to the entire Caucasus region.

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10 Ibid, 305.
Chapter 2: Abkhazia under the Tsar

The Long Arms of the Russian Empire Extend to Transcaucasia

Relations between Abkhazia, Georgia, and Russia were unquestionably complicated during the time of Imperial Russian hegemony in the Caucasus. That is not to say that Russia should bear the blame for the state of confusion and political uncertainty that exists in Abkhazia today, although some scholars do indeed blame Russian tactics in Abkhazia during the imperial period as dividing a once-united kingdom of Georgians and Abkhazians. Svante Cornell sees the period of empire in Transcaucasia as one of the key factors influencing the events of the twentieth century. Cornell argues that Georgia’s contemporary struggle against Russia has its roots in Russia’s “use of minorities within Georgia as a tool to weaken the country, which is viewed as a recurrent feature of Moscow’s policy against Georgia ever since.”

Though the Abkhazians had been administered by foreign powers throughout their history, the late eighteenth century bore witness to an increasing Russian presence in Transcaucasia that dramatically altered the fate of Abkhazia. The Russian Empire, a great power competing with both Persia and Turkey for control over the South Caucasus, valued Abkhazia’s strategic location on the Black Sea and, by the late eighteenth century, began to send troops in greater numbers to the various republics of the South Caucasus to secure them from further Muslim influence. On the one hand, Russian presence in Abkhazia guaranteed the territorial integrity of Abkhazia and safeguarded the Abkhazians from Persian and Turkish hostility. On the other hand, Russian Imperial politics would begin a drastic demographic shift among the

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indigenous population that remains a hindrance to a proper settlement of the Abkhaz question today.

But before the Russians conquered Abkhazia, they set their sights on Georgia, who had also struggled with the Persians and Turks as a means of gaining a greater presence in the region. In 1783 Georgian King Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk with St. Petersburg, making Georgia a Russian protectorate. The terms of the treaty included Russia guaranteeing Georgian territorial integrity and “assistance [in regaining] all lost lands, including Adjara”\(^\text{12}\) which was earlier conquered by the Turks. And “according to secret articles of the treaty, Russia pledged to keep its forces in Georgia in peacetime and in the case of war to increase their numbers.”\(^\text{13}\) But Russia neglected Georgia during the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-92 and, as a result, Tbilisi was sacked by the Persians in September of 1795 with no reaction whatsoever from Georgia’s supposed protector to the north. Devastated by attacks from the Turks in 1787 and the Persians in 1795, Georgia was left weak and officially annexed into the Russian Empire by Alexander I in 1801.

In 1808 Prince Keleshbei Shervashidze (Chachba) wrote to the Tsar requesting the joining of Abkhazia to Russia for protection against the Turks, and on 8 July 1810 the Russian army freed Sukhumi from Turkish control. Prior to the increased Russian presence in the Caucasus brought about by the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk, Abkhazia had enjoyed an independent state policy that shifted between Turkey and Russia under Prince Keleshbei Chachba. But when the Russians secured Sukhumi in the early nineteenth century, the Tsar forcefully severed all Abkhaz diplomatic ties with Turkey. In 1810 Abkhazia came under the protection of the Russian Empire and, two years later, the Treaty of Bucharest gave the entire Abkhaz Black Sea coast to Russia. And as a result of its victory and subsequent territorial gains made in the Caucasian Wars, Russia annexed the rest of Abkhazia into the empire in 1864.

It is worth noting that Abkhazia’s dialogue with the Russians was a little more lucrative than that of Georgia. Throughout the nineteenth century the Russians encouraged the


\(^{13}\) Ibid, 310.
development of education and Abkhaz literature, facilitating the creation of an alphabet for the Abkhaz language based on the Cyrillic script used in Russian. The Abkhazians felt that they had much to gain from the Russians in the educational sphere and, by the end of the nineteenth century, many Abkhazians sent their children to Russian educational institutions both at home and in Russia. It was during the imperial period that the Abkhazians began to feel a deep affinity for Russia and the efforts it had made in guaranteeing Abkhaz cultural autonomy. And Abkhaz nationalists look back on the nineteenth century with a certain sense of nostalgia. Zurab Achba, a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia would write at the beginning of the 1990s that “Abkhazia is Russia…Being a free and independent state we entered into Russia in 1810.” Although this period is fresh in the minds of Abkhaz separatists as one of prosperity and cultural enhancement, matters between the Russians and Abkhazians in the Imperial period were not always so mutually-beneficial.

Population Shift in Abkhazia: Phase One

As mentioned above, Russian influence in Transcaucasia escalated dramatically as a result of the empire’s rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, resulting in numerous wars between the two great powers. Russia saw itself as the protector of all eastern Christians of the Caucasus against the threat of Islam, which gave St. Petersburg a sense of duty in annexing and defending both Abkhazia (although an estimated twenty percent of its population practiced Sunni Islam) and Georgia. Seeing Abkhazia as of particular strategic importance in its attempt to wrest the region from Turkish influence, Russia began to give land along Abkhazia’s Black Sea coast to its own soldiers and civil servants. This resulted in the migration of not only Russians but also Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Poles, Estonians, Germans, Armenians, Greeks, and Laz (from Georgia) into Abkhazia. In 1866 there was a national uprising of Abkhazians who were, in the words of G.P. Lezhava, “cruelly overwhelmed with tsarism.” St. Petersburg declared the Abkhaz people as the

14 Chervonnaya. Conflict in the Caucasus, 16.
guilty party in inciting the uprising. Imperial authorities forcefully transported a large number of Abkhazians to central Russia and Siberia and Abkhaz territory was further opened for settlement to various ethnic groups of the Empire. And, possibly fearing united opposition from the Abkhazians and Georgians, who were also dissatisfied with effect of Russian settlement of the region, St. Petersburg prohibited the settlement of Georgians, with whom the Abkhazians had coexisted for centuries, beyond the Inguri River, which now separates Abkhazia from Georgia proper.

With the depopulation of Abkhazia’s indigenous population, the Russians saw their chance to expand their control of Transcaucasia by means of dramatic population shift. St. Petersburg planned to resettle the deserted land from the mouth of the Kuban to the Inguri River with Cossacks as a means of doing so. In 1864, only two years before the revolt that ignited such fury in imperial authorities, St. Petersburg renamed Abkhazia the Sukhumi Military District, undermining the existence of a unique Abkhaz people, who no longer lived in a territory bearing their name. In fact, Svetlana Chervonnaya argues that the Russians had little regard for the peoples of Abkhazia and that “the concept of Abkhazia was restored only after the overthrow of tsarism and the disintegration of the Russian Empire.” She writes of the ancient partnership between the Abkhazians and Georgians that “in union with Georgia, Abkhazia preserved her ethnohistorical space and identity” and argues that although Kartvelians had been migrating to Abkhazia for centuries before the Russian conquest that Tbilisi never attempted to eradicate the Abkhazians from their homeland, as was the case under Russian control.

Abkhaz support for the Turks in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 had painful repercussions for the indigenous population. Rightfully suspicious of their support for the enemy, during the war St. Petersburg forbade ethnic Abkhazians to settle in Sukhumi, Gudauta, Ochamchira or along the Black Sea coast to prevent those loyal to the Turks from spreading further Turkish influence in areas the Russians considered vital strategic points. In 1877, upwards of 50,000 people were forced to abandon their homeland because of tsarist policy and central

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16 Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 20.
17 Ibid., 20.
Abkhazia was further depopulated from the Kodor to the Psyrtskha River. As a result of the oppressive tsarist policies enacted in Abkhazia, there was a mass migration of an estimated 30,000 people, or close to forty percent of the overall Abkhaz population, to Turkey during the war. Stanislav Lakoba, a prominent Abkhaz scholar, sees St. Petersburg's actions during this time as crucial in weaving the complicated web of nationalities that currently inhabit his homeland. He argues that “up to the tragic events of 1877 Abkhazia consisted almost exclusively of its indigenous Abkhaz population. In a short span of years it was converted into a territorial patchwork in terms of its ethnic makeup.”

The territorial patchwork mentioned by Lakoba was further complicated by St. Petersburg's invitation to Georgians, a people loyal to the Russians in the war with the Turks, to capitalize on the depopulation of Abkhazia. St. Petersburg's offer of Abkhaz land to the Georgians provided them with a significant sense of entitlement, and an imperial consciousness began to take shape in Tbilisi, although itself a province of the tsarist empire. Mingrelians and landless Georgian peasants began to settle Abkhazia in great numbers in the years following the war. Lakoba argues that it was the Georgians, at the initiative of the Russians, who benefited most from Abkhazia being “bled dry” by Russian imperial policies and the massive influx of Georgian immigrants to Abkhazia which resulted from St. Petersburg’s decisions.

As Kartvelians settled Abkhazia in increasing numbers, Abkhaz intellectuals began to distrust Tbilisi, and an extremely hostile attitude toward the Georgians developed alongside this newfound sense of hatred and suspicion. But Georgian domination of Abkhazia was not only a local concern. The conservative St. Petersburg newspaper *Novaia Vremia* asked its readers in 1907 “Can we permit the Abkhazian people to be gobbled up by Kartvelian immigrants?” It was around this time that St. Petersburg shifted its policies somewhat and made an effort to safeguard Abkhaz culture from being swallowed by the Kartvelian settlers. Among the tsarist government’s tasks was assuring that ceremonial worship in Abkhaz churches was conducted in the Abkhaz

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19 Ibid, 85.
20 Ibid, 86.
language, not in Georgian. Only a few years earlier in 1892, the Russian Synod in St. Petersburg founded the Commission for the Translation of Religious Books into Abkhaz to guarantee the integrity of the Abkhaz language in church services.

In addition to their efforts to save the Abkhaz language from extinction, at least in the religious sphere, the Russian imperial presence had earlier also provided the Abkhazians with social benefits that had been previously unknown to the predominantly-peasant population. Tsar Alexander II’s 1861 liberation of the serfs in Russia soon extended to all imperial territories and in 1870 all peasants in Abkhazia were liberated from their former masters. With the formal abolition of serfdom came a mass redistribution of land in which 58,000 peasants received an estimated 192,000 desiatinas (an obsolete Russian measurement equivalent to 2.7 acres) and former serfs were given a deadline of four years to pay off their debts to their former lords to receive full title to the land they worked. Abkhazian nobles received 100,000 desiatinas. However, an 1877 peasant revolt against horrid living conditions put an end to any charitable land redistribution efforts from the Russian side and “the government decided to punish the Abkhaz peasantry and declared that the land was not their private property but was held only in use tenure.”

As a result of the demographic shift enacted by the Russians, by 1897 there were thirty-seven different ethnic groups living in Abkhazia which “within a short time was transformed into a multinational krai where Russian gradually and naturally became the language of international communication.” Cossacks were invited to settle along the Byzbi River to encourage further Russian migration to and Russification of Abkhazia. In the years following the conclusion of the war with Turkey, the tsarist government began to hand out land by fifteen desiatinas to foreigners while Abkhazians and Georgians received only five. Victorious St. Petersburg would continue to alter the population of Abkhazia as many Abkhaz Muslims faced forced exile from their homeland. Many chose to convert to Christianity as a means of avoiding Russian persecution. By the end of the nineteenth century, the tsarist government further complicated the population question in

22 G.P. Lezhava. Mezhdu Gruziei i Rossiei, 49.
Abkhazia by inviting Russians, Georgians, Armenians and Greeks to settle the land left empty by the forced exile of native Abkhazians. By the end of the nineteenth century, ethnic Abkhazians accounted for only fifty-three percent of the overall population of Abkhazia.

But it was not only the Abkhazians who experienced a demographic shift as a result of Russian colonization. Some North Caucasian tribes who fiercely resisted Russian conquest were either ultimately or nearly depleted by their Russian conquerors. The Ubykh, a North Caucasian ethnic group bearing similarities to the Abkhazians, were either killed by the Russians or fled to Turkey alongside the Abkhaz and were therefore completely removed from their traditional homeland. Abkhaz scholar Gueorgui Otyrba writes of this period that "as a result of these population movements and Russian conquest, Abkhazia lost its related people and ally, the Ubykhs, and was separated from other related peoples in the North Caucasus: Kabardians, Adyges, and Circassians." Could this dramatic population shift have been yet another Russian tactic to gain an unchallenged stronghold in strategically-vital Abkhazia?

**St. Petersburg: Abkhazia’s Only Hope for Survival?**

Even though the Abkhazians witnessed the cruel oppression of tsarist politics not only in Abkhazia but also in the neighboring North Caucasus, by the end of the nineteenth century a great number of Abkhazians began to look to Russia as the best provider of security, as the Georgians had failed to defend themselves against the Persians and Turks and had little promise of protecting even smaller Abkhazia. And St. Petersburg was willing to incorporate Abkhazia as one of the Empire’s territories along the Black Sea. G.P. Lezhava writes that “in the 1890s certain chauvinistically-disposed circles in Russia sought to forcibly separate Abkhazia from the remaining piece of historically Georgian territory and to join it with the Kuban district.” Abkhazia’s growing distance from Georgia can also be witnessed in the late-nineteenth century writing of N. Al’bov, a traveler to the region who observed that “the Abkhazians will never be...
settled by the Georgians… they live isolated from one another.” The desire to separate from Georgia and unite with Russia was echoed by many Abkhaz intellectuals, fearing the survival of their culture in an age where many peoples were either completely erased or in the process of extinction.

As noted above, the Abkhazians took solace in the fact that their status as a province of the Russian Empire would protect them from further foreign invasion and guarantee their territorial integrity. It should come as no surprise that in the waning days of imperial power in Transcaucasia, relations between Abkhazians and Georgians took yet another complicated turn for the worse as increasing numbers of Georgians joined the Menshevik Party, supporting the revolutionary movement to overthrow the Tsar. It is therefore not naïve to assume that “distrust and tension in Abkhaz-Georgian relations were distinctly manifest between 1905 and 1907 when the mass of Georgian colonizers actively participated in the revolutionary movement in Abkhazia.” The Abkhazians were further wary of Tbilisi’s intent as by 1918, Kartvelians accounted for an overwhelming 42.1 percent of the population of Abkhazia while Abkhazians accounted for only 21.4 percent and Russians, 11.7 percent.

In summary, when Georgian King Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk in the late eighteenth century, little did he know that this document would complicate matters related to Georgia’s territorial integrity for the next two centuries and beyond. He considered the Christian Russian Empire the best protection against “the encroaching power of Islam” but did not take into account how Russian presence in Georgia would culminate in the diplomatic problems that would plague Tbilisi’s relationship with its northern counterpart. However it is worth noting that Russia’s gradual annexation of Georgia which started in 1801 shaped the borders still observed today as exclusively Georgia’s. The Georgian provinces of Kartli and Kakheti in the east were

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annexed in 1801, with Mingrelia and Imeretia to the west being annexed in 1804, followed by Abkhazia in 1810. John F.R. Wright uses this information to argue that “external powers shaped the borders of Georgia as much as any local national grouping.”\textsuperscript{28} Ronald Grigor Suny agrees with Wright, arguing that “Georgian history before the Russian occupation had been a complex story of division (political and territorial) and periodic attempts at unification. Through its superior military power, the Russian state was able in the first decades of the nineteenth century to ‘gather’ the Georgian lands and establish over them a single political authority.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Georgia and Russia: Parting Ways?}

The relationship between Georgia and Russia acquired a tone of ambiguity during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and interpretations of the Georgian experience under tsarist rule are very different. In the opinion of some historians, tsarist-era Georgians, whose nation Austin Jersild refers to as “the chief representative of the ‘West’ on the ‘Eastern’ frontier of the Caucasus,”\textsuperscript{30} were resentful of the “persistent denigration of their culture and language”\textsuperscript{31} they were subjected to as subjects of the Tsar. Yet they were also able to enjoy national theatre, read Georgian history and freely speak the Georgian language as a reward for complying with the interests of imperial authorities in the South Caucasus. But regardless of whether the Russians were responsible for the denigration of Georgian culture, Imperial rule left the Georgians highly dependent on St. Petersburg and generally unprepared for self-rule.

However, before the Bolsheviks came to power in Georgia in 1921, Russia was engaged in a civil war between the Whites, or forces opposed to Bolshevik rule, and the Reds, or supporters of the communist revolution. During the time of the civil war, Abkhazia and Georgia saw their chance to break free from Russian influence. In 1917, many Abkhazians dreamed of uniting with all Caucasian nationalities, including the Georgians, in the Union of United Mountain

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 137.
\textsuperscript{29} Ronald Grigor Suny. \textit{The making of the Georgian nation}, 64.
Peoples. But Georgia established relations with Germany on 27 August 1918 as a means of protecting itself from further Russian advancement into Georgian territory. But these relations were short-lived as Germany, sensing imminent defeat in the First World War, took measures to withdraw its troops from the Caucasus in order to focus them on the front in greater numbers. Abkhazia formed an independent state within the North Caucasus Confederation but in 1918 was invaded by Georgian Mensheviks who claimed Abkhazia once again as a part of Georgia.

The Democratic Republic of Georgia

During independence from Russia (1918-21), “Georgia’s moderate socialist leaders established a polity based on universal suffrage, popular participation and public contestation for power.” Svetlana Chervonnaya calls the short history of the Georgian Democratic Republic, which was proclaimed on 25 May 1918, “full of a dynamic search for optimal relations with autonomous Abkhazia, based on the people’s will and the norms of a democratic constitution.” An agreement was signed between Tbilisi and the Abkhazian People’s Council on 8 June 1918 which granted Abkhazia “internal autonomy and military aid in case of external aggression.” Minorities numbered thirty percent of the overall population of Georgia and were given special status throughout the Democratic Republic of Georgia, including a quarter of the seats in Parliament.

Abkhazia was granted full autonomy in local affairs but this autonomy was not respected. During the time of the brief existence of the independent Georgian state (1918-1921) matters were further complicated between Tbilisi and its non-Georgian subjects. Non-Georgian areas of the Democratic Republic of Georgia soon faced the Georgianization of local schools and administration. In order to assure Georgian hegemony and freedom from Bolshevik ideology, the Georgian Social Democratic Party, composed primarily of ethnic Georgians, became the sole

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33 Svetlana Chervonnaya. Conflict in the Caucasus, 26.
34 Ibid., 24.
source of political authority in the Republic. By 1919, Tbilisi’s relations with minorities in the
Republic soured due to numerous revolts in non-Georgian areas. The Georgians blamed the
Bolsheviks for inciting the revolts as a means to weaken Georgia and to force the country to once
again submit to Russia. A constituent assembly replaced the Georgian parliament in that same
year and all minority quotas were removed. Stephen F. Jones argues of that period that “the
Georgian socialists, fighting for their state’s physical survival, turned to Georgian nationalism as a
source of legitimacy and political mobilization.”35 And it can easily be argued that it was this sense
of nationalism, which took root during the period of Georgian independence from Russia from
1918 to 1921, that scared Abkhazians from coexisting in an independent state with the
Georgians, a pattern that would repeat itself toward the end of the twentieth century.

Abkhaz autonomists appealed to Georgia for help when the Bolsheviks reached Sukhumi
and Tbilisi responded with a deployment of troops to the Abkhaz capital, for fear of having Red
Army troops stationed along its borders. But Abkhazia was not the only region of Georgia where
ethnic tension was complicating matters between a non-Georgian minority and the center.
Tbilisi’s suppression of a June 1920 revolt in South Ossetia was interpreted by the Ossetians as a
attempt at genocide, but by Tbilisi as an Ossetian attempt at stealing Georgian land. Edward
Ozhiganov writes of this period that “an atmosphere of ethnic intolerance developed and the
hypernationalism that arose in Georgia provoked the mobilization of nationalist movements
among the Abkhazians… and increased resistance to Georgian independence.”36

It was in this atmosphere that Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was
incorporated into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) by the Bolsheviks in 1921.
Russia, grappling for control of strategically-vital Transcaucasia, was eager to once again
incorporate the region into its borders. One could be inclined to argue that the Russians saw
Transcaucasia as little more than a region of strategic value due to its proximity to both Turkey
and Iran. And perhaps Russia desired hegemony in the region simply for fear of having an

increased Persian or Turkish influence along its southern border. However, Firuz Kazemzadeh argues that "to the Russians, both Bolsheviks and Whites, the Caucasus was their property, which sooner or later they would claim." And by the end of the twentieth century, the Georgians would grow tired of Russian claims to their land. The already complicated relationship between Georgia and Russia would be transformed into one clouded by distrust and hatred, due largely in part to the policies enacted by the Soviet government over the next seven decades as Georgia existed as an increasingly unwilling member of the USSR.

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Chapter 3: The Soviet Experience

The Soviet Experience in Georgia

Georgia’s experience as a member of the Soviet Union is ambiguous to say the least. On one hand, Georgians benefited from Soviet policies such as korenizatsiia, or nativization of the numerous non-Russian Soviet republics. As a product of korenizatsiia, Georgia (and Abkhazia as well) benefited from funding and affirmative action programs in local politics. On the other hand, Georgia, which enjoyed only a brief period of independence from Russia from 1918 to 1921, was frustrated at being once again subject to rule by its northern neighbor. The Georgian SSR was also hit extremely hard by a series of arrests during Stalin’s purges in the 1930s. Moscow confirmed Russian as an official language of the Georgian SSR, which was met with hostility by many Georgians and even culminated in a protest in the late 1980s. But Moscow did allow the Georgians (along the Armenians) to keep their unique alphabet in an age when the languages of Central Asia were converted from Arabic to Latin script in the 1920s and from Latin to Cyrillic in the late 1930s. Such laws emanating from Moscow both promoting and degrading Georgia and its culture resulted in this combination of endorsement and interdiction that plagued the complex history of Soviet Abkhazia and Georgia throughout the twentieth century.

Nationalism and the Transformation of Abkhazia and Georgia

The development of the national idea was without question one of the most important factors to emerge from Abkhazia and Georgia in the Soviet period, which lasted in Transcaucasia from 1921 to 1991. Among the most interesting questions of nationalism that was raised by the Soviet nation-building experiment in the early twentieth century has to do with the question of
national self-definition. Stalin wrote that “only the nation itself has the right to determine its fate, no one has the right to forcefully interfere in the life of a nation, to destroy its schools and other establishments, to break down its dispositions and customs, to restrict its language, to abridge its rights.”  

He also wrote concerning the right of a nation’s self-definition that “a nation can get along according to its own desire.” Perhaps then it was convenient for Abkhaz nationalists to side with those loyal to the Bolsheviks to stand together in a united front against Menshevik Georgia?

Ronald Grigor Suny argues of the Soviet period that “rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations.” And this is evident in Georgia as a wave of nationalist sentiment swept the country in the latter days of the Soviet Union. The Georgians, along with the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, were without question one of the Soviet nationalities that “became demographically more consolidated within their ‘homelands,’ acquired effective and articulate national political and intellectual elites, and developed a shared national consciousness.” When the Soviet Union eventually ceased to exist, about sixty million Soviet citizens found themselves living in foreign states. Suny points out that “twenty-five million of these dispersed people considered themselves Russian.” This dilemma helps to explain why Russia assumed a leading role in peacekeeping in all armed conflicts that would follow the Soviet collapse, the overwhelming majority of them in the Caucasus.

Throughout the seventy-four years of the Soviet Union’s existence, Moscow had a chance to consolidate an amazing array of nationalities into one unique Soviet nationality based solely on class. But as history progressed, the Kremlin failed to utilize class as the primary distinguishing factor among its citizens. By 1974, class, one of the major principles upon which the 1917 Revolution was based, was not even indicated on Soviet passports. But nationality was.

38 Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. Marksizm i natsional’nyi vopros (Moscow, USSR: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1950), 50.
39 Ibid., 51.
41 Ibid., 125.
42 Ibid., 111.
Suny argues of the Soviet period that “by its own usurpation of the language of class, the Soviet state had delegitimized it as a rhetoric of dissent and, ironically, authorized ethnicity as an alternative mode of oppositional expression.” And Transcaucasia would be one of the stages upon which ethnic conflict would explode in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Svante Cornell argues that the Soviet concept of nation was a major contributor to the Abkhaz desire of separation from Georgia. He is critical of the Kremlin’s attempt to define nationality among its numerous peoples and describes Soviet nationality policy as “a sequence of nation-building through affirmative action, deportation and genocide, patronage networks, Russification attempts, and pragmatic realpolitik.” Noting that the Abkhazians were empowered by the Kremlin’s attempt to create a nation for them separate from Georgia and that the Georgians responded to Moscow’s efforts with the unleashing of a strong sense of nationalism of their own, Cornell argues that frequent swings of the political pendulum in Georgia “created a strong level of distrust for the higher authorities among minorities.” And Cornell’s argument possesses validity. On the one hand, the Georgians were turning to nationalism to guarantee the validity of their cultural autonomy from Moscow (although Georgian nationalism was unquestionably fostered in part by Soviet nationality policy), while also attempting to push that culture on the numerous non-Georgian minorities under Tbilisi’s jurisdiction. And it was only a matter of time before the level of distrust that had been built up among the Abkhazians would explode into a devastating war which erupted on the territory of the former Georgian SSR in the 1990s.

**The Abkhaz SSR**

The Red Army invaded Georgia in February 1921 and Tbilisi was once again forced under Moscow’s control. Throughout the twentieth century, the tension between the two capitals would grow exponentially until the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. Darrell Slider argues that “the

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43 Ibid., 126.
44 Svante Cornell. *Autonomy and conflict*, 89.
45 Ibid., 89.
period of Soviet rule was marked by repeated efforts to suppress expressions of Georgian nationalism. And it would be this nationalism that would take shape during the Soviet period and would continue to affect the complicated relationship between Moscow, Sukhumi and Tbilisi in the years following the Soviet collapse. On the other hand, the Soviet government in Moscow also fostered Georgian nationalism through various affirmative action programs, the creation of a separate Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the maintenance of the Georgian language and alphabet. Such contradictions should also be kept in mind while exploring the complicated history of the Abkhaz and Georgian experience as members of the Soviet Union.

The Georgian SSR was formed on 25 February 1921 with the Bolsheviks establishing power in Abkhazia on 4 March of the same year. “The establishment of Soviet power on 4 March 1921 was received by the peoples of Abkhazia as liberation from occupation by the Georgian Democratic Republic and the repressive regime of the Mensheviks,” and for good reason. On 31 March 1921 the Bolsheviks declared Abkhazia a separate SSR from the Georgian SSR, but in December of the same year, Moscow changed Abkhazia’s status to that of a treaty SSR within Georgia. “In that period, an agreement of state based on the existence of federative interrelations existed between Georgia and Abkhazia.”

Abkhazia was given special status to create a “buffer along what had recently been a hotly contested border” as a result of intense fighting between Mensheviks and Whites during the civil war. Svante Cornell argues that Sovietization changed the elite relationships between minorities and the Georgian center. “Whereas the Abkhazian nobility had still been somewhat linked to Georgia before the revolution, the new, Communist leadership was linked to Moscow

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and not to Georgia.”

Georgia, on the other hand, retained a sense of independence from the Soviet center, and was among the first states to campaign for the dissolution of the Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. So if the seeds of the current problem in Abkhazia were sewn during the time of the Russian Empire, the Soviet period provided ample fertilizer for the sapling to grow into the tree that it is today.

Although Georgia was considered a Soviet “democratic oasis,” it was Moscow, not Tbilisi, that granted many privileges to the Abkhazians throughout the Soviet period. Under Moscow’s leadership, Abkhazians accounted for the overwhelming majority of high ranking officials in government institutions in Abkhazia, a product of Soviet korenizatsiiia. In fact, before 1931, “being identified as an Abkhazian provided individuals with certain advantages in the former USSR and in Abkhazia itself.” The privileges granted to the Abkhazians under Soviet rule were not only political in nature. Moscow also embarked on an exhaustive campaign to develop and industrialize the autonomous republic. “The Communist Party placed the task of further development of mass state industry as a top priority” and Abkhazia witnessed the development of metallurgy and the fishing industry in addition to the mass production of tobacco, fuel, lumber and white coal. Prior to the establishment of Soviet power in Abkhazia there were almost no industrial goods exported from the region, whose primary exports consisted of agricultural goods such as corn, tobacco, wine and fruit. Under Soviet power, Abkhazia was also turned into an all-Union health resort. But Moscow allocated no extra funds to Sukhumi for proper upkeep and, within only a few decades, Abkhazia was ecologically devastated from a massive influx of tourists and little means of managing waste.

A look at the national structure of the intelligentsia of early Soviet Abkhazia provides us with ample evidence that it was the Russians who enjoyed the most favorable shift in demography in the republic. Abkhazians made up ten percent of the social and political elite,

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50 Svante Cornell. Autonomy and conflict, 150.
Georgians, 29.4 percent while Russians accounted for 32.3 percent. The overall percentage of ethnic Abkhaz population of the republic did in fact dramatically decrease from 55.3 percent in 1897 to 26.4 percent by 1926 and was left at only eighteen percent by 1939. Georgians accounted for 24.4 percent in 1897 and increased to thirty-two percent before seeing a slight decrease in number to 29.5 percent by 1939. But ethnic Russians saw a constant increase in percentage of the population of Abkhazia, accounting for only 4.8 percent of the overall population in 1897 before increasing to 9.6 percent in 1926 and ultimately to 19.3 percent by 1939. It is also worth noting that between 1926 and 1939, the urban population of Georgians in Abkhazia decreased from 26.4 percent to 22.5 percent, while the Russian urban population increased from 17.8 to 41.1 percent. Moreover, Moscow, in its attempt to properly administer a wide variety of ethnicities on the territory of Abkhazia “confirmed the language of international communication as Russian.”

Until 1931, Moscow would continue to consolidate its influence on the population of Abkhazia and focused a large part of its policy in the republic on education. “The instruction of Abkhaz children in middle and elementary schools was conducted in the native Abkhaz, but from the fifth class in Russian.” This, of course, was not a popular phenomenon among Georgians, who saw Moscow as extending its authority too deeply into a region technically under Tbilisi’s jurisdiction. Supporting the notion that Georgians had long viewed Abkhazia as an undisputed part of Georgian territory, Georgian party member I.N. Tuskadze, when asked about Moscow’s decision to educate the population of Abkhazia in Russian in the 1920s, responded that the Russians “wanted to tear away the history and culture of the Abkhazians from the native soil of the history and culture of Georgia.”

54 G.P. Lezhava. Abkhaziia: anatomiiia mezhnatsional’noi napriazhennosti, 76.
55 Ibid., 76.
56 Ibid., 90.
Stalin, Beria and the Georgianization of Abkhazia

One of the figures most closely associated with the complication of Abkhaz-Georgian affairs during the Soviet period was former General Secretary Iosif Stalin. Stalin was, despite being a Georgian by nationality, a Great Russian chauvinist. While serving as the People’s Commissar for Nationalities Affairs under Lenin in 1922, Stalin suggested that all three Transcaucasian republics (Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) be joined into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Lenin refused, arguing that all peoples and republics of the USSR should possess equal status to that of the Russians and the RSFSR. But this simple suggestion was small beer compared to the crimes he would later perpetrate against not only the Abkhazians but the Georgians as well.

On 11 February 1931 at the Sixth Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia, the treaty SSR was incorporated into the Georgian SSR as an ASSR, a decision that was not well-received by the Abkhaz people, who resisted union with Georgia. Many Abkhazians claimed that they had been “forcibly incorporated into the Georgian SSR when they demanded entry into the Russian [SFSR].” But then Abkhaz Communist Party chief Nestor Lakoba saw the entry into Georgia as the lesser of two evils, preferring not to be subject to Stalin’s collectivization campaign that had devastated parts of the RSFSR. Regardless of Lakoba’s opinion, recent historian Svetlana Chervonnaya argues that “in the Abkhaz social consciousness, a myth was cultivated that Abkhazia- because of the malicious intent of its neighbors, the Georgians- was fraudulently deprived of the status of a sovereign republic and artificially turned into an autonomous republic in 1931.” This school of thought prevails even to the current day as separatists argue that it was Georgia who robbed Abkhazia of its independence granted by Moscow in the early days of Soviet power.

This 1931 downgrade in jurisdictional status was a simple minor setback to what was to come during what is now known as Stalin’s Georgianization campaign of Abkhazia. Stalin and Lavrenti Beria, a Mingrelian who served as chief of the Soviet security and secret police

57 G.P. Lezhava. Mezhdu Gruziei i Rossiei, 86.
58 Svetlana Chervonnaya, Conflict in the Caucasus, 30.
apparatus under Stalin, launched a rigorous campaign against the Abkhaz ASSR in the late 1930s which today still looms in the minds of separatists as an attempt by the Georgians to “obliterate the Abkhaz as a cultural entity.” In an obvious attempt at further alteration of the ethnic makeup of the Abkhaz ASSR, Beria announced his plans to move peasants from Western Georgia into Abkhazia. He was met with fierce resistance by Lakoba, who said these orders would be carried out over his dead body. So in 1936 Beria arranged a dinner with Lakoba in Moscow during which the latter was poisoned. Over the next few years Beria oversaw the imprisonment or execution of the remaining members of Lakoba’s family, linking them all posthumously to Trotskyism and labeling all Abkhazian rebels as counterrevolutionaries.

**Population Shift in Abkhazia: Phase Two**

The exact purpose of reducing the indigenous population remains a mystery but there is little doubt as to the success of the Georgianization campaign in Abkhazia. By 1937, Beria had fully implemented his anti-Abkhaz drive which included the mass migration of Mingrelians into the Gali region of Abkhazia, the imposition of a Georgian-based alphabet for the Abkhaz language, the closing of Abkhaz schools and opening of Georgian schools and a significant number of ethnic Georgians taking over positions once held by Abkhazians in the administration of the ASSR. Even though most Abkhaz children did not know Georgian well, if at all, “it was said that during the transition to the Georgian language in Abkhaz schools, Abkhaz children were forbidden to enter Russian schools.” Seeing as how most Abkhaz children spoke Russian and not Georgian as a second language, where were they supposed to get their education if all lessons were to be conducted in a language completely alien to them?

Though both Stalin and Beria were from Georgia, the question remains as to whose initiative this campaign was carried out under and why it was deemed necessary by the Soviet government. Recent Georgian historian Bidzina Savaneli argues that Stalin was a Russian phenomenon who was the “shadow organizer of the occupation and annexation of Georgia by

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60 G.P. Lezhava. *Abkhaziia: Anatomiia mezhnatsional’noi napriazhennosti*, 100.
Soviet Russia.”61 G.P. Lezhava insists that “the policy of Georgianization of the Abkhaz population was conducted by the Georgian government in accordance with Moscow’s precept”62 and points out that similar actions were “conducted on the entire territory of the USSR.”63 According to this line of thought, it was the Kremlin in Moscow who ousted Abkhazians from Abkhazia at the hands of the Georgians. But it is also important to keep in mind that no one in the Caucasus was safe from Beria, who also inflicted heavy losses on his own countrymen. An estimated 10,000 Georgians are said to have been killed while Beria served as Stalin’s regional Party chief.

It would be naïve to assume that Tbilisi had nothing to gain from the Georgianization of Abkhazia but scholars have argued that Tbilisi was but a pawn in a game conducted almost exclusively by the Kremlin. Svetlana Chervonnaya writes, “Further carrying on the tsarist policy of ousting the Abkhazians from their historical homeland, the Soviet government continued this policy by the hands of the Georgians.”64 Lezhava further argues that “ideological opponents of the communists thought that Stalin was the conductor of the Russification policy of all peoples of the former USSR. However, the policy sanctioned by him with regard to Abkhazia and the Abkhaz language provided his opponents with a means of accusing him of supporting the national interests of the Georgian people.”65

But why did Stalin and Beria embark on such an atrocious quest to undermine Abkhaz identity if not destroy them as a people altogether? Beria argued that the settlement of Georgians in Abkhazia was necessary in order to “hinder the mass settlement of Abkhazia by Armenians,”66 a people who at one point accounted for the overwhelming majority of residents of the Georgian capital and prospered there for centuries. Although Stalin could be labeled a fierce Russian chauvinist, Beria strove for unchallenged Georgian domination of Abkhazia. His fear of Armenians settling Abkhazia and dominating the Abkhaz capital was related to his fear of

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61 Bidzina Savaneli. Abkhaziia: istoriia i sovremennost’, 35.
64 Svetlana Chervonnaya. Conflict in the Caucasus, 31.
66 Ibid, 35.
decreasing Georgian influence over Sukhumi. Abkhazia also proved to be a significant source of wealth as it accounted for an estimated fifty-two percent of overall tobacco exported from the USSR. Charles King argues that the Soviet government’s policy, especially under Beria, was to “encourage the immigration of ethnic Georgians into the autonomous republic, in part to help boost agricultural production there, in part to alter the ethnic balance further in favor of the Georgians.”

Some in more conservative circles in Georgia today argue that an attempt to Georgianize Abkhazia should be dismissed on the grounds that Abkhazia is an integral part of Georgia and that “talk of Georgianizing Georgia is a contradiction in terms.” Even though Beria’s goal was Georgian dominance of Abkhazia, many Georgians who migrated to Abkhazia during the Georgianization process were sent against their will. In fact, “Abkhazians recall truckloads of these, often unwilling, immigrants being dumped with nowhere to live and thus having to be given temporary refuge by the locals themselves.” Bearing this in mind could one fairly assume that Beria’s forced migration of Kartvelians to Abkhazia was a crime not only against the Abkhazians but against those Kartvelians he forcefully uprooted from their homes and families simply to tip a statistic in his favor?

Regardless of on whose initiative this campaign was carried out, the results were significant for Abkhazia as tens of thousands of Kartvelians settled the republic between 1937 and 1953 and Georgian scholars then declared the Abkhaz people a branch of the Kartvelians whose territory was indigenous to Georgia. Insult was added to injury as the Georgians enjoyed a higher standard of living and significant cultural development in comparison to the Abkhaz. For their part, the Abkhazians felt oppressed in their own homeland. The 1939 Soviet census was the first of a long series that would show that the Abkhazians were a minority in their own territory, numbering less than the Kartvelian and Russian population of Abkhazia. Abkhazians accounted for only 56,200 while there were 92,000 Kartvelians and 60,200 Russians. Stalin’s

69 Ibid., 203.
Georgianization campaign was a direct threat to the Abkhaz language, culture, and history and demonstrations requesting the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia occurred on an almost once-a-decade basis after his death, in 1957, 1964, 1978 and 1989. In fact, the Abkhaz language was replaced by Georgian in schools or offices simply out of the fear of punishment from Moscow. And from this date forward even Abkhaz history was distorted by and filtered through Georgian, not Russian, sources.

During the Second World War Stalin ordered the exile of numerous North Caucasian peoples, among them the Chechens, Ingush, Balkar, Karachai and Kalmyk in addition to the Volga Germans and Crimea Tatars. All of these people were forced from their homelands due to supposed collaboration with the German enemy. And four years later, an estimated 8,000 Muslims in Georgia, the Meskhetian Turks, were deported to Central Asia “and plans were made to exile the Abkhazians as well.” But Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 brought on the timely abandonment of all of these plans. Svante Cornell argues that it was Abkhazia’s status in Georgia that saved the republic from the forced deportation enacted throughout the Russian North Caucasus. In fact, at the same time as Stalin implemented his plans for deportation and cultural undermining of the numerous North Caucasian peoples listed above, Tbilisi granted autonomy to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and granted them protection through affirmative action programs. Even though both of these regions were pressured to assimilate into Georgia under Beria and Stalin, by the time of Stalin’s death and Beria’s downfall in 1953, these policies were reversed and most minority rights were restored in full, although there was, naturally, an increase in Georgian hegemony in local politics.

**Post-Stalin Rehabilitation**

In the years following Stalin’s death, Abkhazians began to speak out against their forced status within the Georgian SSR and “under the pretext of correcting the mistakes of the Stalinist leadership in nationality policy, conditions were created for the renewal of the nationalist

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movement in Abkhazia.\textsuperscript{71} With this newfound sense of nationalism, the Abkhazians made an effort to distance themselves from Georgia. The administration of the autonomous republic requested transfer to the Russian SFSR in 1957 but Tbilisi refused to allow secession. And only twenty years later, Abkhazian leaders, arguing that their status as a full union republic had been unjustly removed by Stalin, again demanded either SSR status or a transfer to Russia (much like the Crimea had been transferred to Ukraine from Russia in 1954) and protested against the continuing migration of Georgians into Abkhazia.

Despite the Abkhazians’ desire to separate from Tbilisi, the Georgians continued to grant certain freedoms and opportunities to the Abkhazians. Tbilisi even established a university for Abkhaz students in Sukhumi, but ethnic Abkhazians had trouble competing for jobs given their primarily peasant social base. Other measures taken to improve the lot of non-Georgian minorities included the opening of schools and the promotion of local languages throughout the Georgian SSR. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Tbilisi had made exhaustive efforts to promote the Abkhaz culture and language. But this turned out to be not enough.

From 1977 to 1978, 130 prominent Abkhazians protested to Moscow over what they saw as continuing Georgianization and once again requested secession from Georgia and union with Russia. Eduard Shevardnadze, who was the Georgian Party’s first secretary in Tbilisi at the time, took note of the Abkhazians’ protests over political and economic conditions in the autonomous republic. He understood their motives for organizing the protests but refused to listen to requests for separation from Tbilisi. Under pressure from the Kremlin to use force in quelling the ethnic unrest that had arisen in Abkhazia, Shevardnadze launched an affirmative action program to increase the role of Abkhaz elites in running the republic. As a result of Shevardnadze’s initiative, by 1990 most of the Abkhaz economy was under local control and sixty-seven percent of government ministers of the autonomous republic were ethnic Abkhazians. Despite Abkhazians accounting for one-sixth of the overall population of the ASSR, they controlled almost half of all secretarial positions in local government.

\textsuperscript{71} G.P. Lezhava, \textit{Mezhdu Gruziei i Rossiei}, 170.
Georgia’s Exit from Moscow’s Orbit and its Implications for Abkhazia

The desire to separate from Georgia was fueled by the Abkhazians’ fear of the rising sense of nationalism that had taken root amongst the Georgians in the later days of the Soviet Union. Abkhazians linked the Georgian nationalist movement to the “question of Georgian ethnic hegemony in the republic.” However it is important to note that this sense of Georgian nationalism did not randomly appear overnight. It had its own roots in the Georgians’ anxiety of preserving their own minority status within the USSR. Stephen F. Jones asserts, “Stimulated by a history of foreign invasion, Russification, and traditionally weak demographic representation in the republic’s periphery, Georgians’ deep national insecurity encouraged them to support nationalist policies designed to protect majority, rather than minority, rights.” And this desire among the Georgians to protect majority, rather than minority rights, was indeed manifest by the late 1980s as nationalistic organizations of Georgians sought not only the integrity of ethnic Georgian rights in the Georgian SSR, but ultimately, secession from the Soviet Union.

From 1987 to 1988, numerous informal organizations of Georgian citizens like the Ilya Chavchavadze Society, the Party for the National Independence of Georgia, and the National Christian Party of Georgia were legalized by the Communist Party. These parties unified close to 3,000 people and in the words of G.P. Lezhava, “the activity of these unions and parties bore a sharply-expressed anti-constitutional, anti-Soviet, national chauvinist character from the very beginning.” Their goals included changing the current social-political structure as well as the national-state and administrative system of the Georgian SSR. But their primary objective was the overthrow of Soviet power in Georgia and Georgia’s ultimate exit from the Soviet Union. To let their voices be heard, members of these parties took to various forms of protest including political strikes, sabotage, hunger strikes, non-sanctioned meetings and anti-Soviet manifestoes.

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The Abkhazians’ fear of being crushed by the increasingly nationalistic Georgians culminated in another series of calls for independence from Tbilisi and union with Moscow in 1988 and 1989. Loyal communists in Moscow supported both of these calls, pointing to Lenin’s precept of a people’s right to self-determination as a nation. But Tbilisi refused to hear the Abkhaz desire for separation from Georgia on the grounds that Georgianized princes had ruled Abkhazia for centuries and that the two peoples shared a long history as members of the same state. Tbilisi also employed the results of the 1979 census to bolster its argument against Abkhaz secession. In the census, only seventeen percent of the population of Abkhazia was composed of Abkhazians while Georgians numbered forty-three percent and Russians accounted for sixteen percent.

On 9 April 1989, an anti-Soviet protest in Tbilisi was violently put down by the Soviet army which only further fuelled Tbilisi’s desire to separate from Moscow. And the situation was complicated by the fact that there were still many Soviet military bases in Abkhazia that could be used to pressure Tbilisi into conceding to Moscow’s demands. How could Georgia secede from the Soviet Union if there were still active Soviet military bases on a vital part of Georgian territory? It was then that Tbilisi decided that drastic measures should be taken in consolidating its influence over all Georgian and non-Georgian parts of the Georgian SSR.

By the end of the decade, Tbilisi began to exit Moscow’s orbit. The number of ethnic Russians living in Georgia dropped sharply since the anti-Soviet nationalist movement had solidified in Georgia in the late 1980s. And by 1989, Georgian was declared the sole state language of the Georgian SSR. Ethnic tensions soon spread to the University of Sukhumi, where Tbilisi opened a branch of Tbilisi State University for ethnic Georgian students on 14 May 1989. The opening of a university solely for Georgians was met with riots in Sukhumi which resulted in the deaths of eighteen people with several hundred wounded. Shortly thereafter, the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR adopted a resolution which raised Abkhazia’s status to that of a Union Republic in an effort to officially declare independence. But the resolution failed to gain the two-thirds vote needed to pass and the Georgian Supreme Soviet declared the resolution null and
void according to Article 78 of the Soviet constitution, which said that “territory and borders of a
Union Republic could not be changed without the consent of that Republic’s authorities.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{The Abkhazians Turn to Moscow}

It is important to note that by the late 1980s, the interests of the Abkhaz elite and the
Soviet government now fully coincided. Svante Cornell argues that “both saw the independence
of Georgia as a direct existential threat to their interests. Moscow saw the independence of any of
its component republics as a threat to the Union’s survival; likewise the Abkhaz and South
Ossetians saw the prospect of remaining within an independent, nationalistic Georgia as a direct
threat to their national rights, both political and cultural.”\textsuperscript{76} Perhaps Moscow, seeing Georgia as a
lost cause, began to look to Abkhazia as the best means of clinging onto Russian influence in the
strategically-vital region? The events following the fall of the Soviet Union bolster this idea but will
be examined below.

Abkhazia also saw Russia as a natural ally in fighting forced incorporation into an
independent, nationalistic Georgia. As the Abkhaz secession movement gained momentum,
Abkhaz leaders actively lobbied for Russian interference “up to and including annexation of their
regions to Russia.”\textsuperscript{77} Even though Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the future president of post-Soviet,
independent Georgia offered a guarantee that under his party “the cultural autonomy of all ethnic
groups would be respected,”\textsuperscript{78} Abkhaz leaders had difficulty accepting this promise. In fact, they
had already made up their minds as to their future as a part of Georgia.

\textbf{Did Georgian Nationalism Doom Georgia?}

The Abkhazians decided that they simply could not exist in an independent Georgia for
many reasons. One of them was linguistic in nature. The possible loss of Russian as a state
language of the Georgian SSR threatened minorities who knew Georgian poorly, if at all. In fact

\textsuperscript{75} Svante Cornell. \textit{Autonomy and Conflict}, 161.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{77} Darrell Slider. “Democratization in Georgia,” 170.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 170.
“Attempts by ethnic minorities to carve out spheres of cultural or economic sovereignty were perceived by the Georgian government as a challenge to its people’s spatial and social hegemony” and non-Georgian minorities were faced with a language they didn’t speak well being forced upon them by Tbilisi. “The Abkhaz national movement reacted negatively to Georgian being declared an official language along with Abkhaz on Abkhaz territory.” The Georgians were accelerating at full speed in the opposite direction of Moscow’s orbit, while the Abkhazians (and most other non-Georgian minorities) increased their dependence on their northern neighbor, easing closer to Moscow’s sphere of influence and away from the nationalistic government in Tbilisi. Ronald Grigor Suny writes of this period that “as the Georgian government became more independent of Moscow, as the possibility of secession became more real, the non-Georgians, who had long preferred the distant Russians to the Georgians, felt ever more vulnerable.” This vulnerability led to sporadic armed clashes between Georgians and Abkhazians in Sukhumi and between Georgians and Ossetians in Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital.

Abkhazia: Leader of the Anti-Georgian Coalition

It was therefore easy for loyal communists to create an international anti-Georgian coalition of sorts to hinder Georgia in her quest for independence from the Soviet Union. And in Georgia, the Abkhazians assumed a major role in this coalition. But why did the Soviet government choose to employ the Abkhazians over any of the other non-Georgian minorities inhabiting the republic? Many Georgians, after all, had equally scornful attitudes to the Abkhazians, Ossetians and Meskhetian Turks and continued to blame these non-Georgian minorities in helping the Bolsheviks annex Georgia into the USSR almost seventy years previously. Svetlana Chervonnaya argues that Abkhazians assumed the leading role of the anti-Georgian coalition because they “had the required ‘Caucasian temperament,’ an historical right to

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80 G.P. Lezhava. Mezhdu Gruziei i Rossiei, 239.
their native land, affiliation to Islam, ethnocultural differences from Georgians and there were long-standing frictions and contradictions on social, demographic, administrative and political grounds."\textsuperscript{82}

Matters would become further complicated when Georgian troops took control of Sukhumi after the Abkhaz-Georgian fighting that followed the establishment of the branch of Tbilisi State University in the Abkhaz capital. Abkhazians used the events in Sukhumi as a means of uniting non-Georgian nationalities such as Ossetians and Armenians in an anti-Georgian axis. Abkhazian leaders then proposed the unification of all Abkhazians, Russians, Armenians and other interested groups in the area into a common Abkhazian Autonomous Republic that would oppose Georgian anti-Sovietism. Anti-Georgian sentiment rose exponentially in Abkhazia and rallies and scholarly conferences were now being held on a regular basis to debate and protest the legitimacy of Georgian hegemony in the autonomous republic. Georgians were now portrayed by equally nationalistic Abkhaz separatists as enemies of Abkhazia who did not possess the right to inhabit Abkhaz territory.

It was also in the late 1980s that the Kremlin took note of the increasing political instability in Abkhazia and other non-Georgian regions of the Georgian SSR and decided that intervention was necessary to preserve the integrity of the Soviet Union. Moscow saw itself as the defender of the interests of a fairly significant ethnic Russian population within the borders of the Georgian SSR. And as defender of these interests, Moscow understood that Georgia was edging closer to an ultimate exit from the USSR. It sought to keep Abkhazia under its influence or as Svetlana Chervonnaya argues, simply wished to “wrest Abkhazia away from Georgia.”\textsuperscript{83}

\textit{Georgia: From SSR to Independent State}

It was in the dying days of the Soviet Union that Soviet agents teamed up with Abkhaz nationalists, regardless of their individual motives, to guarantee continued Russian influence in the region. Both parties had realized their mutual distrust of Georgian anti-Sovietism and

\textsuperscript{82} Svetlana Chervonnaya. \textit{Conflict in the Caucasus}, 55.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 81.
established a closer political dialogue as means of combating Georgia’s exit from the USSR. But Georgia no longer wished to answer to Moscow. Georgia had had enough and exited the Soviet Union by declaring independence under new democratically-elected president Zviad Gamsakhurdia on 9 April 1991.

The situation between Abkhazia, Georgia and Russia seemed to be heading into a quagmire of epic proportions. But was war the only answer to a problem that seemed unsolvable? Viktor Popkov, a journalist for the Russian publication Ogoniok, noted that “brute force is, alas, the only thing to which people, deafened and blinded by their respective pretensions, will pay attention.”84 Popkov observed the situation between the Georgians and Abkhazians and admitted, “I, as a Russian, cannot escape a feeling of guilt for our having tampered with the fate of nations.”85 He likened the situation to that of an extremely dysfunctional family and understood it as follows: The Abkhazians saw the Kartvelian population of Abkhazia as starting the conflict, “acting as the tools of those who hope, with their assistance, to ‘realize their anti-Soviet ambitions for the foundation of a single indivisible Georgia outside the USSR.’”86 The Georgians, on the other hand, insisted that the Abkhazians are to blame and that their politicians had “filled them with ideas about their special rights to land, who had obtained ‘by the stupidity, or rather the anti-nationalist policies first of Russia and then of the Soviet state, an entirely bogus Abkhazian autonomy.’”87

Overcome by a sense of desperation and urgency to exit the new, potentially nationalistic Georgia as soon as possible, the Abkhaz leadership began to plan their escape. But how would they go about securing independence from Tbilisi? Appealing to the Kremlin had been mostly in vain and the protests and appeals that had occurred on a very regular basis throughout the past century had accomplished nothing. It can easily be argued that by 1991, Abkhaz leaders

85 Ibid., 108.
86 Ibid., 121.
87 Ibid., 121.
understood that this political standoff could not be solved through diplomatic means and realized that armed conflict was one of the only available options in seeking separation from Georgia.
Chapter 4: Abkhazia as a Post-Soviet Chessboard

Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the New Georgia

When Georgia left the USSR all legislation passed after February of 1921 was declared null and void. On 26 May 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president of independent Georgia with a stunning eighty-seven percent of the vote. Gamsakhurdia, who came to power following a course designed to sever all ties between Georgia and the Soviet Union, was extremely critical of the legacy of Soviet rule in Georgia and desired a rapid and thorough break from the past, turning to Georgian nationalism as a means of doing so. Gamsakhurdia was not known for speaking eloquently with regard to the numerous non-Georgian minorities in independent Georgia. He often depicted Abkhaz, Ossetian, Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities in the country as either “guests of the Georgians or agents of Soviet power.” Edward Ozhiganov argues that “this brand of post-communist ethno-nationalism became dominant in Georgia because it initially raised the banner of struggle against the Russian-dominated communist empire, and articulated the desire to build a liberal, democratic state.”

Gamsakhurdia argued that “during the Soviet period in Georgia the rights of the native Georgian population were violated especially harshly: discrimination and oppression reached a culmination, especially in those regions were communist totalitarianism established an ethnocracy of the non-Georgian population.” This was an obvious slight at Moscow’s involvement in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He had earlier lashed out at Abkhazia on 9 April 1989 by arguing that “the Abkhazian nation has never existed. They’re struggling with

Georgia and Georgians to become Russified.\(^91\) Based on this information, it can be argued that Gamsakhurdia, who once insisted that “the entire period of Georgia’s forced existence as a member of the USSR is marked as bloody terror and repressions”\(^92\) had nothing against Abkhazia or the Abkhaz people per se but simply viewed them as a possible vehicle for the reintroduction of Russian influence into a republic considered indisputably Georgian.

The Problem with Gamsakhurdia’s Rhetoric

G.P. Lezhava believes that the Gamsakhurdia epoch was “the first attempt at creating national statehood”\(^93\) in Georgia. But it is nearly impossible to create such a state in a region that enjoys such a rich, multiethnic heritage. Gamsakhurdia’s slogans such as “Georgia for the Georgians” and “Georgia: God’s chosen nation” were problematic because, in the words of Thomas Goltz, “Georgia had never been a unitary or mono-ethnic state.”\(^94\) Instead Georgia had long been inhabited by a variety of ethnic groups including, but not limited to, Laz, Mingrelians, Svans, Muslim Georgians, Ossetians, Azeris, Armenians, Abkhazians, Jews, Zoroastrian Kurds and Kists (Chechens), who accounted for a significant percentage of the overall population of Georgia.

Regardless of Georgia’s multinational heritage, Tbilisi began to devise an ethnic policy based on indigenes and settlers in the period shortly following independence from Moscow. Shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, the South Ossetian autonomous region was abolished in December of 1990 on the grounds that the Ossetians were settlers who began to arrive in Georgia in the nineteenth century. Gamsakhurdia believed that they were illegally granted autonomy by the Bolsheviks in 1922 as a reward for their anti-Georgian activity during the Russian civil war. Relying on this rhetoric, Gamsakhurdia called for all Ossetians to return to their “real” homeland in North Ossetia, now a part of the Russian Federation. But in reality, the

\(^92\) Ibid., 318.
\(^93\) Ibid., 232.
Ossetians had been living on Georgian territory since the time of the Mongol invasions, when they were forced out of their medieval homeland south of the Don River in modern day Russia and over the Caucasus into the area now known as South Ossetia.

Although much has been said about Gamsakhurdia’s extreme and flawed nationalist rhetoric, certain eyewitness accounts indicate that in fact he sought a peaceful middle ground with the minorities of Georgia, especially with the Abkhazians, whom he is reported to have respected and admired. A correspondent from the Russian newspaper Izvestiia brought this idea to life in a personal interview during a trip to Sukhumi in the early 1990s. Referring to a meeting with supporters of Gamsakhurdia where the status of Abkhazia within Georgia was exhaustively discussed, he writes that, “never before had I seen in them such reverent attitudes toward the Abkhazians. An appearance of Zviad Gamsakhurdia was shown on local TV where he spoke of his kind feelings toward Abkhazians in the Abkhaz language.”

So could it be that Gamsakhurdia’s overly nationalistic slogans were simply a call for Tbilisi’s separation from Moscow and nothing more? It is indeed possible; Svante Cornell also argues that “Gamsakhurdia earned the name of a dictator more through his words and his attitude than through his actions.” But Gamsakhurdia could not have it both ways. Regardless of his true opinions on ethnic minorities in Georgia, Gamsakhurdia’s days as president were numbered as he faced a powerful opposition movement which was successful in removing him from power in March 1992. Gamsakhurdia was replaced with Eduard Shevardnadze and almost immediately the United States recognized Georgia, which secured their seat in the United Nations and membership in the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But with the fall of Gamsakhurdia’s government came Abkhazia’s status in what Cornell calls “constitutional limbo.”

Regardless of Gamsakhurdia’s personal attitude towards the Abkhazians, he would not permit the autonomous republic’s self-determination, noting that ninety-eight percent of

95 Stanislav Lakoba. Abkhaziia: de-fakto ili Gruziiia de-iure?: o politike Rossii i Abkhazii v postsovetskii period (Sapporo, Japan: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2001), 20.
96 Svante Cornell. Autonomy and conflict, 165.
97 Ibid., 168.
Abkhazians voted to preserve the USSR and boycotted Georgia’s bid for independence from Moscow. There were minor efforts made in Sukhumi to better incorporate the Abkhazians, already representing a disproportional percentage of the population, in local politics such as the proposal of a two-chamber parliament to incorporate all the nationalities of Abkhazia. But this proposal, like all others before it of a similar nature, was rejected by the Kartvelian majority of the republic. Ethnic Abkhazians were further scared of Tbilisi’s substitution of the 1978 constitution of the Georgian SSR with the pre-Soviet 1921 constitution which failed to mention Abkhazia as an entity with state-legal relations. Among Shevardnedze’s first acts in late 1992, this gesture was interpreted in Abkhazia as the removal of the constitutional guarantee of Abkhazia’s autonomous status. It is interesting to note that under Gamsakhurdia, the supposedly fierce, Abkhaz-hating nationalist, the situation in Abkhazia was relatively calm and it was not until Shevardnadze, the supposed great democratic reformer, came to power did things start to heat up in the autonomous republic.

**Ardzinba as an Answer to Nationalistic Georgia**

It was in this atmosphere that Vladislav Ardzinba came to power in Abkhazia and established the ethnocratic dictatorship that scholars have accused Gamsakhurdia of attempting to do in Georgia. Ardzinba was elected chair of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet in December 1990 and, after the fall of the Soviet Union, established an electoral law providing for a sixty-five seat parliament that failed to proportionally represent the population of Abkhazia. Twenty-eight chairs were awarded to Abkhazians, twenty-six to Georgians, with the remainder to be split among Armenians, Russians and Greeks. But this system was extremely flawed and ineffective as seventeen percent of the population of Abkhazia controlled forty-three percent of the seats in parliament. Despite being a minority in the autonomous republic, ethnic Abkhazians enjoyed full control over the republic’s institutions and benefited from these types of affirmative action policies beyond any shadow of a doubt. But Svante Cornell argues that “this ethnopolitical activity at the
helm of the Abkhaz ASSR would have been impossible without ethnic Abkhaz domination of political life in the autonomous republic.”

Gamsakhurdia was notorious for his attitudes toward national minorities, but perhaps his most significant flaw as president of independent Georgia was that he overlooked the political atrocities enacted in Sukhumi under Ardzinba. Such atrocities included the violation of democratic norms and civil rights and the enactment of apartheid-type rules that sacked Georgian personnel from positions of political authority in Abkhazia. It was Shevardnadze who called Ardzinba’s government “pure racial discrimination and the establishment of an ethno-dictatorship.”

Ardzinba permitted, in the words of Svetlana Chervonnaya, the creation of “prerogatives and restrictions on a solely ethnic basis” in the formation of new electoral districts to tip political issues in his favor.

Ardzinba based his ineffective and discriminatory policies on the urgency to separate Abkhazia from Georgia. He argued that “Abkhazia has already long been trying to separate itself from the Tbilisi diktat. In doing this, Abkhazians appeal to their history and the experience of independent statehood, including during the period of Soviet power when Abkhazia had the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic and later as a treaty republic within the Georgian SSR.”

Ardzinba saw Shevardnadze’s reluctance to address the issue as a major hindrance in solving the Abkhaz question. Along these lines of thought, Abkhazians hoped for a “change of Georgia’s position and for the possibility of a positive decision of the Abkhaz problem. However, the stubborn reluctance to state his opinion regarding the question and, the main thing, the absence of any practical actions brought about a serious doubt in the sincerity of Shevardnadze’s desire to stabilize the situation.” But Ardzinba knew he could not achieve separation from Georgia alone and began to look abroad for help.

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99 Svetlana Chervonnaya. Conflict in the Caucasus, 91.
100 Ibid., 91.
102 Ibid., 10.
In November 1991, Sukhumi hosted a congress of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which Ardzinba believed would prove an invaluable ally in the struggle for separation from Tbilisi, but he would need help from a more powerful ally. At the congress, Ardzinba’s government established ethnic coalitions in Abkhazia with Armenians and Russians and regionally with various peoples of the North Caucasus. It was at this congress that the “Confederative Union of Mountain People of the Caucasus” was formed in one of Ardzinba’s most significant efforts to distance Abkhazia from Georgia. The Abkhaz leadership had also been well-connected to Moscow during Soviet times and Ardzinba himself had deep connections with Russian politicians like Evgeny Primakov, who served as the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow and Anatoly Lukianov, the parliamentary chairman who has been called the ideologue of the August 1991 coup against the Gorbachev government. Connections with such hardliners without question inspired Ardzinba to seek secession from rebellious, democratic Georgia.

It became clear in Tbilisi that no dialogue could be established with such a fanatical nationalist in Ardzinba, who had enacted discriminatory policies to assure that Georgians had no say in Abkhaz politics and who established ties with parties hostile to the interests of independent Georgia. Ardzinba’s obsession with separation from Georgia aside, it is interesting to note that of the seventy thousand ethnic Abkhazians living on the territory of Abkhazia at the time, a significant minority of them actually sought separation from Georgia. These Abkhaz nationalists argued that Abkhazia was at one point independent from both Tbilisi and Moscow and was forced into union with Georgia through the short-lived Transcaucasus Soviet Socialist Republic of 1922. They felt robbed of their land by Stalin and Beria who had done much to reduce the indigenous population of Abkhazia. But, as Thomas Goltz argues, “curiously, that resentment was not so much directed against the Russians who had conquered their country in the nineteenth century,
but against the two ‘Georgians’- Stalin and particularly Beria- who had stripped them of the quasi-independent homeland vouchsafed them by Lenin.”

Those Abkhazians who sought separation from Georgia argued that “as a result of Georgian colonization throughout the past one hundred years, the ethnodemographic situation in Abkhazia changed by indigenous means.” A quick look at the population of Abkhazia at the time helps us understand the sense of urgency with which the Abkhazians felt they were fighting for their own survival as a people. In 1886, Abkhazians composed 85.7 percent of the population with Kartvelians accounting for no more than six percent. By the fall of the Soviet Union, Abkhazians accounted for only 17.8 percent and Georgians an overwhelming 45.7 percent.

But some have argued that war was convenient for Shevardnadze as well. Shortly after coming to power, Shevardnadze was met with resistance from those still loyal to Gamsakhurdia (or “Zviadists”) and feared that Georgia would lose its sense of union gained in the days leading up to and following the collapse of the USSR if the opposition movement gained much momentum. Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba argues that Shevardnadze knew exactly what to do in this case: “start a war in Abkhazia in order to unite Georgia on the basis of anti-Abkhaz sentiments.” Shevardnadze felt threatened by the activity of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples in Abkhazia and feared possible future Russian involvement, as many Russians still loyal to the Soviet regime dreamed of undermining Georgia, who had conceived and carried out its own secession from the USSR. It is therefore not illogical to assume that the Georgian president saw a war with the separatists as one of his only options in keeping the country from ultimately falling apart.

**War Erupts**

Among the fuses that ignited the war between Tbilisi and Sukhumi was the fact that a large number of Zviadist insurgents stormed a television and radio building in the Abkhaz capital.

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103 Thomas Goltz. *Georgia diary*, 52.
105 Ibid., 27.
Fuel was added to the fire shortly thereafter, when the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Sukhumi proposed replacing Givi Lominadze, an ethnic Georgian, with Alexandr Ankvab, a loyal adherent of Ardzinba. On 23 July 1992, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia ordered the termination of the 1978 constitution of the Abkhaz ASSR and restored the constitution of 1925, defining Abkhazia as an independent state united with Georgia on the basis of a treaty. But Ardzinba’s government passed the decision without a referendum, which was a “violation of parliamentary procedure and in the absence of the necessary quorum for constitutional changes.”

The decision was ignored by Turkey, Abkhazia’s closest and largest neighbor, as well as by Russia and all of the other countries of the former Soviet Union. And, as a result of this diplomatic failure, Ardzinba’s political legitimacy was called into question. Even in Sukhumi, an opposition movement to Ardzinba’s government was growing at an increasingly rapid pace. Feeling the pressure of fighting for the survival of his political career, Ardzinba was left with two options. One of which was to abandon what he had started and concede that Abkhazia was indeed part of Georgia. The other option was to assert Abkhazia’s right to independence by force. Surrounded by Russian advisers, representatives of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples and those still loyal to the Soviet Union, Ardzinba chose the latter.

In the days following Georgia’s admission to the United Nations on 11 August 1992, fire was exchanged between Georgian troops and Abkhaz separatists in the village of Machara to the southeast of Sukhumi. Shortly thereafter, many key figures in Shevardnadze’s government were taken hostage and held in Abkhazia. Among them were the Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs, Roman Gventsadze; National Security Advisor and Shevardnadze aide, David Salaridze; Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Zibert Khazalia; and Deputy Head of the Chief Board of the Administrative Police, Valerian Rogava. It remains unclear whether Zviadists or Abkhaz rebels are the guilty party in the kidnapping, but this convinced Shevardnadze that the situation in Abkhazia would not stabilize itself. Just two days later, Abkhaz rebels destroyed a railway bridge linking Batumi, Poti and Sukhumi with Tbilisi, which directly threatened the Georgian capital’s link
to these key port cities. That was all that Shevardnadze could handle and he decided to launch an attack on both Zviadist and Abkhaz rebels. On 14 August Georgian forces entered Sukhumi and took control of the city.

Ardzinba accused the Georgian side of aggression even though the soldiers who poured into Sukhumi were only lightly armed. On 14 August 1992, he demanded the mobilization of the Abkhaz population for war with Georgia (calling all men aged eighteen to forty-five to arms regardless of their wishes or opinions on the issue of Abkhaz separatism) and raided Soviet-era weapons depots and obtained illegally-purchased and imported materials for the war from pillaged Russian armories. Such an incident occurred at a Russian air defense unit stationed in Gudauta, where the commanding officer refused to hand over Russian weapons to the separatists, but they were taken by force. The Georgian forces that entered Sukhumi were sent to free the hostages from Shevardnadze’s government who were being held in the city of Gali and posed no direct threat to Abkhaz civilians. But Ardzinba’s government unleashed a criminal terror on the Georgian population of Sukhumi which included looting, killing and forced deportation to unknown locations. Even though Ardzinba claimed this was a war on the Georgians, Russians and Armenians were only spared from terrorism if they expressed hatred towards Tbilisi and sent their sons to register for the war.

Svetlana Chervonnaya argues that “Ardzinba was very much concerned with the creation of an ideological cover for this war. A myth had to be created about imperialist Georgia violating tiny, unprotected Abkhazia, whose only crime was allegedly to have briefly enjoyed freedom.”

Ardzinba hoped for Russian intervention by informing Moscow that Russian citizens were in danger because of Georgian military involvement in Abkhazia. But this was in fact a pathetic attempt at gaining a powerful ally as it was Abkhaz rebels, not Georgian soldiers, who attacked a Russian armory at the Bombora airfield during the course of the war. Separatist snipers also shot at Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia attempting on numerous occasions to blame the shootings on Georgians.

107 Ibid., 124.
The Shift in Momentum: Is Russia to Credit?

The Kremlin did all it could from a diplomatic standpoint to prevent further bloodshed in Abkhazia. On 3 September 1992 President Yeltsin, who had brokered a ceasefire in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict only a few months prior on 24 June, called on Georgia to withdraw troops from Abkhazia and “suggested to conduct a meeting between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba”\(^\text{108}\) in Moscow. But this meeting never materialized and the fighting continued. The war further intensified, and as a result the National State Archive in Sukhumi was totally destroyed and a humiliating number of refugees of all ethnicities sought an escape from the chaos in Abkhazia.

As the war continued to rage, it seemed that a Georgian victory was inevitable. However, the tide began to turn at the Battle of Gagra, which lasted from 1 to 6 October 1992. As a result of an Abkhaz victory in the battle, the war became increasingly unpopular in Tbilisi, especially among Georgian civilians, who saw their government fighting for a lost cause while failing to address the multitude of other economic, political and social problems that plagued the country. Dodge Billingsley argues that “in many ways the battle for Gagra was the battle for Abkhazia itself. Once in control of the border and port-facilities in the northern corner of the republic, the Abkhaz leadership was assured that supplies and manpower would get through.”\(^\text{109}\) It would only be a matter of time before the separatists would force Georgian troops to leave Abkhazia and an epic standoff ensued.

Georgia blamed Russia for not taking a more active role in enforcing the ceasefire that all sides had agreed to in Moscow. And shortly after the Abkhaz victory in Gagra, Russian troops stationed in the city were attacked, leaving twenty-one dead and thirty-five wounded. Moscow claimed that the attack was orchestrated by Georgian terrorists in an effort to recapture the city. On 31 December 1992, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev warned the Georgian Defense

\(^{108}\) Stanislav Lakoba. Abkhazia: de-fakto ili Gruziia de-iure?, 46.

Minister, Tengiz Kitovani, that such attacks must stop and promised Russian retaliation if similar acts of terrorism continued. In return, Grachev promised to restrict Russian military involvement in the conflict to air and artillery strikes only against Georgian troops who attacked Russian military targets.

But were the Abkhaz separatists alone in fighting the Georgians? It is well-documented that they were aided by volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples. But there is also clear evidence indicating regular Russian military support of Abkhazia. This support increased significantly after Georgian forces had shelled a Russian military laboratory at Eschera. Although Moscow officially supported Georgian territorial integrity, it did nothing to stop the flow of troops and supplies across the Russian-Abkhaz border to the separatists. And by February and March of 1993, Russian planes bombed Sukhumi while the city was under Georgian control and the Russian army participated in the Abkhaz attack to recapture the city from Georgian forces, utilizing up to seventy Russian tanks.

Previously, the Kremlin had played a simple diplomatic role in the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia and most of the troops in Russian uniform stationed in the country were serving as peacekeepers approved by the international community. Russian troops had also been stationed in Abkhazia since Soviet times and when they were fired on by justifiably suspicious Georgian troops, the Russians began to counter these attacks in self defense. It was a common belief in Tbilisi that Moscow supplied Abkhaz separatists with weapons. But this accusation, while indeed possible, was unfounded as a significant number of Russian arms in Abkhazia in 1992 were acquired unofficially or through force, such as during the numerous raids on former Soviet military bases organized by Ardzinba’s government.

But Russia’s involvement in the war, as briefly mentioned above, was not purely military in nature. There was yet another Russian-brokered ceasefire suggested on 12 July 1993 that demanded the ultimate withdrawal of Georgian troops and the handing over of Abkhaz weapons to Russian peacekeepers. Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Boris Pastukhov, who arranged the terms of the ceasefire, also proposed the creation of a multinational police force to monitor the
area and enforce the withdrawal of all troops. But the Abkhazians stubbornly insisted on the restoration of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia, which was refused by Tbilisi, and the ceasefire was never signed.

The separatists resumed fire on 26 September. On the same day, Abkhaz rebels also evicted two hundred thousand Georgians from Gali. Pastukhov continued to work on his draft of the ceasefire, which was eventually signed on 27 July in Sochi and called for a phased demilitarization. But by fifteen days Georgia had still not withdrawn its weaponry from Abkhazia and the fighting continued.

Matters were further complicated for Shevardnadze by the fact that on 7 September 1993, Gamsakhurdia’s supporters entered Gali and captured heavy weapons from Georgian forces. At this point, Georgia’s political civil war had overlapped with its “ethnic” civil war and Shevardnadze could feel the candle burning at both ends. The Abkhazians argued that the Georgians were transferring military equipment to local Georgian armed detachments under the pretext that the weapons had been captured by the Zviadists and began to point fingers at the Georgians, arguing that this was a clear violation of the Sochi agreement. Several days later, bitter fighting erupted on all fronts with each side accusing the other of violating Pastukhov’s ceasefire. By the end of 1993, Georgian troops were pushed back to the Inguri River, which marked the boundary between Abkhazia and Georgia proper. The war effort now seemed hopeless for the Georgians and Shevardnadze began to understand the importance of what had just happened in Abkhazia and how Tbilisi could not solve this problem on its own through military force.

**Moscow: Regional Peacekeeper or Threat to Georgian Territorial Integrity?**

As a result of the fact that the Moscow agreements were not fulfilled, Shevardnadze began to look elsewhere for help. He turned to the United Nations in New York with the plea that “the loss of Sukhumi will mean the disintegration of Georgia”\(^\text{110}\) but his call for help did not

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 76.
summon the answer he had hoped for. Yet, Russia was willing to listen. Moscow heard this
desperate plea and on 20 September 1993 introduced economic sanctions against Abkhazia,
turning off all existing supplies of energy it had been providing the autonomous republic. And on 1
December 1993, there were negotiations in Geneva between Tbilisi and Sukhumi with Moscow
once again serving as the middle man. Moscow partially withdrew its economic sanctions on
Abkhazia in September and on 3 February 1994 Yeltsin visited Tbilisi and signed a cooperation
agreement with the Georgian government. It was during this meeting that Yeltsin promised that
Russia would help build the Georgian army in exchange for Tbilisi allowing the maintenance of
Russian military bases in Georgia and the stationing of Russian troops along Georgia’s border
with Turkey. As a result of this meeting, Stanislav Lakoba argues that “the Georgian side sensed
Moscow’s support and on 6 February subjected Abkhaz positions to shelling.” The UN Security
Council also sensed Moscow’s willingness to mediate the conflict and on 20 June 1994 appointed
Russia as the leader of the peacekeeping process in Georgia.

Although Russia had much to gain from its involvement in the conflict between Georgia
and Abkhazia, Yeltsin played a very significant role in attempting to prevent further bloodshed
between the two belligerent parties. In September 1992 he had even proposed that
Shevardnadze and Ardzinba shake hands as he “with great solemnity proclaimed ‘the war in
Abkhazia is over.’” In fact many in Yeltsin’s government argued that “an exit could only be
found by means of negotiations with Russia.” At first, the agreement, thought to have ended all
fire between Georgia and Abkhazia, was perceived as a success of Shevardnadze and his
position was further strengthened by the parliamentary elections of October 1992.

But the war continued regardless of what was said and done in Moscow between
Shevardnadze and Ardzinba. And the Georgians began to accuse Russia of supporting the
Abkhazians. In March of 1993, Georgian forces shot down a Russian SU-27 jet, which prompted
Shevardnadze to start speaking of the “Russo-Georgian conflict” in Abkhazia. But Russian

111 Stanislav Lakoba. *Abkhaziiia: de-fakto ili Gruziia de-iure?*, 88.
112 O.L. Marganiia, ed. *SSSR posle raspada*, 255.
113 Ibid., 255.
general Pavel Grachev claimed that Russia had nothing to do with the plane, which he claimed was one of five Georgian planes that had been painted with Russian markings. And at the same time, Shevardnadze’s forces faced further pressure from Zviadists in Western Georgia who were preparing for a war to remove the president, whom Gamsakhurdia labeled a puppet of Moscow, from power.

*From Bloody War to Frozen Conflict*

Shevardnadze, facing criticism from Sukhumi for not taking a more active stance on how to solve the situation, was left in a somewhat contradictory stance. On the one hand, he was arguing constantly for a ceasefire and productive dialogue with Ardzinba. On the other hand, he argued that a Georgian military victory would be the only answer to the question of Abkhaz separatism. As the war raged on, it seemed to Sukhumi that the Georgians did not want to negotiate with Ardzinba’s government to reach a peaceful settlement so the Abhazians were forced to look for an ally, which they found in Moscow.

All sides involved had their positions at the onset of the war. The Georgians argued that the UN recognized its borders and that Tbilisi wanted peace with Abkhazia but that Georgia also had the right to defend its territorial integrity. Abkhazians requested, at the very least, autonomy within Georgia and it remained unclear whether they were fighting for outright independence or not. It was argued from Sukhumi’s point of view that “the Abkhazians see the struggle as one for the survival of their culture and language, or simply the preservation of their separate identity. The Kartvelians, if nothing else, desperately do not want to lose territory that could provide an independent Georgia with much-needed foreign currency from the tourist trade, given the rich potential of such exotic resorts as Gagra, Pitsunda and Sukhumi itself.”114 Moscow wanted to install pro-Russian governments in all Transcaucasian capitals as a guarantee of stability and desired a clear southern border with Georgia. Moscow’s drive for a military and diplomatic

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presence in the countries of Transcaucasia was also indicative of their desire to keep the rebellious peoples of the North Caucasus within the borders of the Russian Federation.

Andrei Kozyrev, Russia’s foreign minister from 1990 to 1996, believed that Russia needed a strong Georgia to stabilize the entire region, which could have easily fallen into disorder from the developing conflicts in the North Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh. The Kremlin at the time was facing its own separatist crisis in Chechnya and could now understand the sense of urgency with which the Georgians fought to ensure the territorial integrity of their state. Kozyrev argued that Russia should not support Abkhazia in the conflict so as not to set a precedent for separatism and that Abkhazia should remain an undisputed part of Georgia, lest Chechnya separate from Russia. And Russia’s military involvement in Georgia seemed mutually beneficial. Moscow benefited from its increased presence in the region and Shevardnadze, who opposed the ultimate withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia, heavily depended on Russia to build the Georgian armed forces. However, Moscow was occupied with its own separatist conflict in Chechnya and could not take sole responsibility for restoring and guaranteeing Georgia’s territorial integrity.

The war in Abkhazia, which lasted only from August 1992 to September 1993, devastated Georgia and resulted in the loss of Abkhazia as well as an estimated twenty thousand lives. The war also undermined the already-fragile Georgian economy, which was still undergoing the change from the Soviet-style command economy which had been prevalent in the country for the past seventy years. In terms of economic fragility, Georgia found itself in a situation much like the one it was in upon the collapse of tsarist rule, which left the Georgian economy extremely unbalanced and unprepared for self-rule, which made it easy for the Bolsheviks to conquer Tbilisi. Many argue that Shevardnadze, in an effort to keep his country together, sacrificed Georgian sovereignty by allowing Russia to play such a significant role in the solving of the Abkhaz question. And, unfortunately, this economic-political nexus has not been solved and still plagues Georgian politics today, with little hope of a facile, mutually-beneficial answer on the horizon.
But the war between Abkhaz separatists and Georgian federal troops appeared to be the only answer in place of a proper diplomatic agreement. Georgia was acting within its rights under international law in preventing Abkhaz secession and the Abkhaz leadership was obstinate in negotiations with Tbilisi. Svetlana Chervonnaya believes that “war was declared on the people of Georgia by Vladislav Ardzinba who, acting on his own separatist political agenda, was forcing the Abkhazian people into this terrible catastrophe. He had no legal or constitutional power to act as he did.” At the beginning of the conflict, it was unclear what exactly Sukhumi wanted, but Abkhaz nationalists felt that a significant degree of independence from Georgia was necessary to “safeguard the preservation and development of Abkhazian culture and national identity.” Insisting that the government in Tbilisi was detached and therefore unable to provide for Abkhazia, separatists further argued that separation from Georgia was necessary “to implement social and economic policies suited to the specific conditions of Abkhazia.” But Tbilisi argued that it had not violated any of the rights of the Abkhazian population and that it could not allow a significant part of its territory to fall from Georgian control and possibly into the hands of the Russians, whom the Georgians wished to bar from participating in Georgian political life now that the Soviet Union had fallen for good. But Shevardnadze failed in excluding Russia from Georgian internal affairs and in October of 1993 made a decision that would further complicate matters between Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia.

The CIS Dilemma

Shevardnadze’s plea for help had been largely ignored by the international community, including the UN, and Moscow was willing to lend a hand to its southern neighbor, but for a price. Yeltsin, in return for assistance in the Abkhaz conflict, requested Georgia’s membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a Moscow-run, mostly symbolic organization composed of former Soviet republics concerned with trade, finance, lawmaking and security in

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117 Ibid., 298.
the region. Under the terms of Shevardnadze’s agreement with Yeltsin, the stationing of Russian troops in Georgia was allowed, and Russian troops were given full permission to patrol Georgia’s border with Turkey. Svante Cornell argues that Georgia had “failed to retain its factual independence, and seemed to have returned to Russian domination.”

But in justifying Georgia’s entry into the CIS, Shevardnadze argued that now Georgia would have a chance to keep Abkhazia within Georgia since, as was a common view in Georgia, “the conflict in the autonomous republic was initiated by reactionary forces within Russia and led by rebellious elements in the [Russian] White House.” Shevardnadze cited Georgia’s break with Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union as the primary reason for this turn for the worse and announced that joining the CIS “guarantees the integrity and inviolability of the frontiers of our country.”

Georgia, much like Azerbaijan, was reluctant to join the CIS upon its inception, viewing it as little more than a new Soviet Union and form of Russian colonial power. This opinion was contrary to Armenia’s, which hailed Russia as the historic guarantor of its existence and joined the CIS without a moment’s hesitation. But Russia wished to hold influence over the entire region, not just in one country. Thomas Goltz argues that the fall of the USSR was for Russia “another case of painful decolonization” and that Russia was reluctant to leave Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union due to its access to the Black Sea and border with Turkey. Many in Russia believed that Abkhazia would serve as a worthy replacement of coastline that the Kremlin lost to independent Ukraine. Therefore, by drawing Georgia into the CIS, Russia once again gained significant access to the Black Sea coast and held influence in a country Moscow feared it had lost forever after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ronald Grigor Suny believes that Moscow jumped at the opportunity to encourage separatist nationalisms in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and that this encouragement led to “de-facto independence from Georgian control, the brutal expulsion of Georgians from Abkhazia.

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120 Ibid., 389.
and the bitter invitation from Shevardnadze to Yeltsin to reintroduce Russian troops into Georgia. But Yeltsin saw Russia as the guarantor of peace and stability in the Caucasus, although it was difficult for Russian leaders to treat the leaders in Tbilisi as equals because they were used to ordering them as they had done in the Soviet past. This led to the necessity for the Russians to redefine statehood. It was the CIS that provided the opportunity for Russia to control domestic processes in the former USSR without resorting to war to solve disputes with the countries referred to in Russian as the Near Abroad. For Russians, the CIS is “primarily a political, economic, and military mechanism to secure the republic’s dominant role in the region.”

With Georgia’s entry into the CIS, Shevardnadze allowed Russia to assume the leading role in peacekeeping in Abkhazia. Even though he was at first unhappy with the fact that all peacekeepers sent to Abkhazia were Russians, more than one hundred UN observers were sent to the region to monitor Russian activity. But it can be argued that by joining the CIS, Shevardnadze compromised Tbilisi’s independence from Moscow, an independence that Georgians had desired since the nineteenth century. Of signing the agreement with Moscow that brought Georgia into the CIS, Ronald Grigor Suny writes that “Georgians were forced to accept a cold recognition of the new power of the old imperial center in Transcaucasian politics.”

But was this a mutually beneficial agreement? Suny defines Georgian history as “a series of resistances from foreign domination and alien cultural inputs that threatened to compromise its national integrity.” By joining the CIS, Georgia gained much-needed Russian assistance in its struggle against Abkhazia but at the cost of once again submitting to another form of foreign domination. But throughout its history, Georgia, a small nation of no more than five million people, has had ties to greater powers such as Iran, Turkey and Russia and these ties have in turned shaped Georgia’s present.

125 Ibid., 333.
Russia was in a position of power in bringing Georgia into the CIS as the conflict with Abkhazia devastated Georgia. The number of ethnic Georgians killed in Abkhazia is still largely unknown but the war took a tremendous toll on the prospect of future stability in Georgia. Zaza Gachechiladze argues that “the conflict put Georgia on its knees and destroyed its economy. Georgia was forced to look to Russia as the only hope for restoring some stability.”

Gachechiladze predicted in 1995 that the Abkhazians would continue to pursue the genocidal policy toward Georgians that was enacted during the war, while Russia would try to pressure Georgia for dependence.

Georgians reveled in being fully independent of Moscow after the fall of the Soviet Union. The sovereignty that many of them had dreamed of for most of the twentieth century had finally come to fruition but was undermined by Shevardnadze’s pen in less than one year after secession from the USSR. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Shevardnadze’s invitation to Moscow to mediate the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia was not very well-received in Tbilisi, especially among supporters of Gamsakhurdia. A popular argument among Georgians is that “Russia could not and should not be a peacekeeper and negotiator in the conflict between the Abkhazians and the Georgians as it allowed the invasion of armed Russian citizens and their participation in an armed conflict in Abkhazia, violating the Georgian border and interfering in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.” But Shevardnadze agreed to join the CIS to prove Georgia’s loyalty to Russia, who had been supplying the poorly-prepared Georgian forces with necessary equipment for the Abkhaz conflict and could easily leave Tbilisi stranded, fighting a losing battle against a motivated and highly-mobilized enemy.

Russia’s Role as Mediator in Retrospect

Obviously it was in Russia’s best interest to keep Georgia dependent and Shevardnadze’s agreement to catapult Georgia into the CIS was certainly coherent with the Kremlin’s desire to retain influence in Transcaucasia. But Shevardnadze looked to Russia for

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stability when Russia itself was not stable, facing many pressing issues related to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and a failing economy. Russia saw the opportunity to serve as peacekeeper in Abkhazia as a beneficial situation that would assure the safety of the Yeltsin regime at home, the restoration of regional dominance, and the opportunity to play an active diplomatic and military role in the affairs of its southern neighbor. And the role of Russia in the 1992 war is contradictory and inconsistent, certainly from a diplomatic and military perspective. On the one hand, Moscow supported Georgian territorial integrity but on the other hand, Russian arms did end up in the hands of Abkhaz rebels. On 25 September 1992, the Russian Supreme Soviet attributed the main cause of the conflict to the introduction of Georgian forces into Abkhazia but when Shevardnadze turned to Russia for help and agreed to Moscow’s demands, the overall opinion in Russia changed dramatically. Russian troops first appeared as peacekeepers after the final ceasefire between Sukhumi and Tbilisi on 14 May 1994 and it can be argued that it was Moscow who assumed the leading role because other CIS states had difficulty providing even minimal funds, let alone manpower and military equipment. And by July 1994, there were three thousand Russian peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia.

But as Shevardnadze discovered, Moscow was the only party willing to dedicate any significant amount of attention to the matter. The UN did not answer Shevardnadze’s pleas for help as he would have liked them to and Moscow seemed to be the only one who would answer him. So in order to gain the necessary assistance from a foreign power, Shevardnadze yielded to Russia’s requests and Georgia was thrust into the CIS and Russian troops were stationed throughout the country. But that’s not to say that Moscow refused to allow the international community access to the conflict it was mediating. Ted Hopf points out quite the opposite, that “Kozyrev and Yeltsin repeatedly asked for OSCE and UN authorization for its actions in Georgia,”128 but these requests were seldom answered. One is left to wonder if the European

involvement that was found in the Baltic republics after the fall of the Soviet Union could have been applied to the Caucasus as well.

There were also differing views within Russia itself about what Moscow’s role should be in the conflict. Yeltsin “sought to play the role of an honest broker in the conflict” whereas the Russian military sought to restore Moscow’s control over the Caucasus, especially over strategically-located Abkhazia. By late 1992, Yeltsin was seeking peace while Abkhaz separatists waged war using Russian arms and equipment. In September 1993, Yeltsin condemned the breaking of the ceasefire and the occupation of Sukhumi by Abkhaz rebels while Defense Minister Pavel Grachev claimed that “only the immediate withdrawal of all Georgian forces from Abkhazia could bring an end to the conflict.”

Russia’s world superpower status was fading and Moscow was desperate to remain, at the very least, a regional superpower. Russia also desired a stable and peaceful periphery, a long-standing historical desire, and decided to take the leading role in the peacekeeping process for a multitude of reasons. First of all, the Kremlin feared that conflicts on its southern border would spill into Russia and that separatist movements within the Russian Federation would endanger the country’s territorial integrity. “Moreover, an agreement with Georgia over the status of the border would help ensure that the peoples of the north Caucasus would continue to be administered within the Russian Federation.” Moscow also took note of the degree of loyalty to the Soviet Union prevalent in Abkhazia, which saw itself as trapped in the borders of a fiercely independent and nationalistic Georgia and saw the opportunity to hold onto Russian influence in Transcaucasia.

Andrei Zagorski argues that Moscow’s involvement in Abkhazia was not necessarily driven by the desire to have satellite states along its southern border. He believes that Russia’s interest in the Caucasus “implies that the country is surrounded by politically stable, economically

129 Svante Cornell. Autonomy and conflict, 182.
130 Ibid., 183.
wealthy, and Russia-friendly neighbor states.\textsuperscript{132} It could therefore easily be argued that Moscow’s ultimate objective in the region is to regain a stable and Russia-friendly Georgia as a bulwark against instability in the North Caucasus and in Transcaucasia. Russia feared renewed Turkish and Iranian interest in the region and desired a stable fleet on the Black Sea. Seeing as how Moscow has already been forced by Kiev to reduce its naval presence in the Black Sea due to conflict with Ukraine over the division of the Black Sea Fleet anchored at Sevastopol’ (now part of independent Ukraine), perhaps Russia desired Georgian or Abkhaz ports along the prized Black Sea coast?

**Georgia: Hindrance to Georgian Territorial Integrity?**

Both the Abkhazians and Ossetians claimed that Georgia’s “oppressive cultural policies and the dilution of the local autonomy that both regions had during the Soviet years\textsuperscript{133} were the primary factors hindering a proper settlement. However, the Georgian government did much to reach an equitable solution. In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, Tbilisi has amended the constitution; citizenship laws have been enacted to better incorporate non-Georgian minorities; educational statutes have been passed to guarantee native language education; and civil rights as well as local autonomy have been extended to both the Abkhazians and Ossetians living in Georgia. But Charles King argues that “the real obstacle to a final settlement has been the fact that, beneath the façade of unresolved grievances and international negotiations, political elites in each region have managed to build states that now function about as well as the recognized countries of which they are still formally constituents.”\textsuperscript{134}

King presents a compelling argument as both separatist regions of Georgia enjoy benefits that Georgians do not. For example, recent Russian economic support has greatly enhanced local economies while Georgia struggles to keep up after being left in utter ruin after

\textsuperscript{132} Andrei Zagorski. “The Role of Russia in the South Caucasus” in International Peace Academy, eds. *Promoting institutional responses to the challenges in the Caucasus* (Vienna, Austria: Diplomatische Akademie Wien, 2001), 68.


\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 535.
the war with Abkhaz separatists. The Russian gas giant Gazprom constantly pressures Georgia to pay its massive energy debt while gas supplies are subsidized to its separatist regions. And since late 2000, Russia has required a visa of all Georgian citizens entering the Russian Federation but not of Abkhazians or Ossetians. Keeping this in mind, it is easy to see why the citizens of Georgia’s separatist regions see a brighter future as republics within the Russian Federation.

From an Abkhaz perspective, twentieth century life under Moscow was much more prosperous and enjoyable than life under Tbilisi. For example, as a part of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz ASSR enjoyed a high standard of living and was spared being subjected to collective farms. The Abkhaz population was only .2 percent of the overall Soviet population yet supplied twenty percent of Soviet tea and the exotic fruit trade provided extra income for Abkhazians. But as a part of independent Georgia, the Abkhaz economy incurred an estimated ten billion dollar loss as a result of the war. Tourism, a once-booming industry in Soviet Abkhazia, was almost deserted, tea production declined by a factor of fifteen, citruses and tobacco by a factor of four and walnut production was halved. It goes without saying that all of these once profitable industries that the Soviet government had nurtured were left in utter ruin after the war and Abkhazians witnessed a dramatic decrease in standard of living. During the war, Abkhazia was isolated from any form of aid from the international community and naturally saw Russia as one of the only possible providers during this seemingly never ending war with Georgia.

**Winners and Losers in the War in Abkhazia**

Based on the information provided above, it can be inferred that the major dividing line between the Abkhazians and Georgians is Russia. Chervonnaya points out that the “Abkhazian leaders have continuously, almost desperately, declared their loyalty to Russia, their desire to be placed under Russian protection. The Georgians, on the other hand, have always made plain their desire for independence.”

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135 Svetlana Chervonnaya. *Conflict in the Caucasus*, 46.
face of Russia, is the primary exception to Chervonnaya’s claim. Abkhaz separatists remember
the Soviet Union as a time of economic and political prosperity for the autonomous republic and
many believe, problematic as it may be, that had Abkhazia remained under Moscow’s control that
it would have enjoyed the status of a union republic had Tbilisi not forced Sukhumi under its
jurisdiction during Stalin’s Georgianization campaign in the 1930s. Chervonnaya cites Russian
involvement in the conflict as yet another Russian conquest of the Caucasus which was part of
the “colonial policy of the Russian Empire and various means were used in this policy, ranging
from the exercise of military power to diplomatic deception.” But we should not forget that it
was Russia who initiated a vast majority of the ceasefires that attempted to end the war and that
Moscow often turned to the international community for assistance in mediating the conflict but
was often ignored. So can we necessarily blame Moscow for desiring to have a stable southern
border and taking many of the steps, often totally unassisted from organizations such as the UN,
toward reaching a settlement between Sukhumi and Tbilisi?

Georgia can certainly be called a loser in the conflict. At the conclusion of the war, there
were Russian peacekeepers stationed in both separatist regions of the country, which is a clear
compromise of Tbilisi’s sovereignty. But as a military loser, Georgia had little to offer the
separatist regimes, who have insisted on full independence from Tbilisi in order to begin
negotiations. The status quo only benefits the separatists and strengthens their positions. And the
fact that Shevardnadze’s Georgia was among the most corrupt and unstable former Soviet
republics throughout the 1990s gave separatists no reason to want to join an independent
Georgia.

An estimated twenty thousand people died in Abkhazia, most of them civilians. Those
civilians who were not casualties of the brutal war chose to leave their homes for safer dwellings.
The Georgian population of Abkhazia was especially affected. At the outbreak of the war
Georgians accounted for 50.6 percent of the population of Abkhazia, but by 1997 were only
fifteen percent, equal to the Russian population. The Abkhaz population, meanwhile, enjoyed an

136 Ibid., 17.
increase as Ardzinba’s government invited ethnic Abkhazians to settle areas where ethnic Georgians had been evicted by force during the war.

If anyone could be called a winner in the conflict, it should be Russia. Georgia and Abkhazia both suffered enormous damage to their economies and countless numbers of civilians in Abkhazia, regardless of ethnicity, were left without homes. But Russia gained from its involvement in the conflict a guarantee of influence in a region it saw as of particular strategic value. Georgia had requested an extension of the Russian peacekeeping mandate for another six-month period twice a year since 1994. Russia at no time insisted on any such extensions. Georgia, who would have to be the ultimate loser in the conflict, was left devastated and weak, much like it had been when the Bolsheviks forcibly incorporated the Georgian Democratic Republic into the Soviet Union almost a century earlier.

**The End and Beginning of an Era**

The Kremlin’s own struggle with separatist Chechnya in the North Caucasus, however, slightly changed the Russian position in the Abkhaz conflict. Upon the outbreak of the first Chechen War in December of 1994, Abkhazia once again declared independence with Ardzinba as president. “At the very height of military events in Chechnya and bombings of Grozny, Shevardnadze announced his preparedness to grant the same status to Abkhazia that Russia had granted to Chechnya,”¹³⁷ that is, a guarantee of autonomy. Moscow now saw an ally in Tbilisi in the struggle to prevent separatism and changed its position on the Abkhaz-Georgian issue almost overnight. Between 1995 and 1997 “Moscow set up a sea and land blockade of Abkhazia, refused to accept Abkhaz passports and cut off all phone lines that connected Abkhazia with the outside world.”¹³⁸ And in September 1995 Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin came to Tbilisi and promised that Russia would help reestablish Georgian control over Abkhazia in exchange for Georgia’s agreeing to keep the five Russian military bases that had been agreed upon when Georgia first entered the CIS in place for the next twenty-five years.

¹³⁷ Stanislav Lakoba. *Abkhaziia: de-fakto ili Gruziia de-iure?*, 95.
¹³⁸ Ibid., 95.
Though the fighting had all but ended and all sides were left to lick their wounds, it seemed as if the conflict was frozen, even though very sporadic fighting continued through 1998. In 1999, Ardzinba was reelected with ninety-nine percent of the vote and the border with Georgia was closed. In 2001, a helicopter with UN observers was shot down over Abkhazia, resulting in the deaths of nine people. Russian peacekeepers increased their numbers in the region and Russian aviators bombed the area around Kodori Gorge, a region that Georgian forces had secured earlier. Shevardnadze accused Russia of aggression and demanded withdrawal from the CIS and the withdrawal of all Russian military bases and peacekeepers from Georgian territory, which included Abkhazia. This request was ignored and by the spring of 2002 residents of Abkhazia began to receive Russian passports. Shevardnadze’s ineffective policies and ill-advised decisions had led Georgia to this. But by 2003, change was on the horizon in Tbilisi.
Epilogue: The Struggle Continues

The Rose Revolution and the Rise of Mikheil Saakashvili

By early November of 2003, Shevardnadze’s political career was nearing its end as Georgians lost their patience with his ineffective policies. His government had allowed a total embarrassment of the country through military defeat at the hands of Abkhaz separatists; corruption plagued the still-fragile Georgian economy; and Georgia had compromised its sovereignty in the face of Russia through its entry into the CIS and welcoming of Russian troops on Georgian soil. Later that month, the Rose Revolution, a bloodless movement led by American-educated lawyer Mikheil Saakashvili displaced Shevardnadze and promised a brighter, Western-oriented future for Georgia free of Soviet-style corruption. Among Saakashvili’s primary political goals were the removal of Russian influence from independent Georgia and the establishment of closer political discourse with the West, namely the United States and leading members of the European community. But Saakashvili’s Western orientation and harsh criticism of Russia were not well-received by the Kremlin and would continue to complicate the relationship between the two distrustful neighbors.

Russo-Georgian relations have worsened rapidly since November of 2003, as Saakashvili and Russian President Vladimir Putin engaged in a series of wars of words, trade battles and border closings. But as Saakashvili’s primary objective was to sever all remaining ties with Russia, newly-elected Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh had every intent of strengthening them. Bagapsh, who served as the Abkhaz Prime Minister from 1997 to 1999, was elected president of Abkhazia in 2004. His running mate was Raul Khadjimba, a candidate who received the blessing of the outgoing Ardzinba and who, like Putin, had enjoyed a political career in the
KGB during Soviet times. They voiced their intent to continue the Abkhaz dialogue with Russia that had been established under Ardzinba and saw Saakashvili as a hindrance to closer ties with Moscow. Upon coming to power in November of 2003, Saakashvili had plans to reincorporate Abkhazia (and all the other breakaway regions) into Georgia but this goal was complicated by his vocal criticism of Russia and by the new Abkhaz government’s loyalty to the Kremlin.

In July 2006, Georgian forces launched a police operation on Abkhazia’s Georgian-populated Kodori Gorge to oust the rebellious administrator of the precinct, Emzar Kvitsiani, from power. Kvitsiani, who had been appointed by Shevardnadze before the Rose Revolution, refused to acknowledge Saakashvili’s government as legitimate. The ouster was successful and the gorge was brought back under Tbilisi’s control. But the struggle between Abkhaz separatists and the Georgian center was far from over. Sporadic acts of violence would continue in Abkhazia, with Georgians accusing Russian peacekeepers of inciting violence among Abkhaz rebels by supplying them with arms and financial aid. This claim was bolstered by the fact that the Russian ruble became the de-facto Abkhaz unit of currency. Reconciliation seemed far from reach.

Saakashvili was successful in gaining the attention of the West that Shevardnadze had failed to find. In Washington, the Bush administration had a very clear, supportive policy towards Georgia and was among the frontrunners to support the country’s incorporation into NATO. Here lies another sore spot in the relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow, as NATO had been established in 1949 in direct opposition to the Kremlin. Russia naturally felt threatened by the US’s relationship with Georgia and the possibility of NATO expanding into what was once considered Moscow’s backyard (Ukraine was another country in negotiations with the organization regarding future membership) and America’s courtship of Georgia would continue to influence already-tense Russo-Georgian relations.

**The Crisis in South Ossetia and Implications for Abkhazia**

As mentioned above, a large part of the reason why Russia had been unable to fully devote itself to the South Caucasus was its own military involvement in Chechnya. But Chechnya,
even following a second war launched in August 1999, was becoming more stable with the installment of Ramzan Kadyrov, a politician loyal to the Kremlin, as president. With the situation stabilizing in Chechnya could it be assumed that Russia would once again venture into the South Caucasus? Increased Russian activity in Transcaucasia would take on new significance for the already fragile state of relations between Moscow and Tbilisi with the brief five-day war waged between Russia and Georgia in August 2008.

On 7 August 2008 Georgian forces attacked the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali claiming that it was responding to a Russian invasion of Georgian territory. But the Russians argued that it was in fact the Georgians who had attacked first. Since the 1992 conflict in South Ossetia, the area has existed without a precise declaration of its status within Georgia, with only occasional flashes of violence springing up over the past sixteen years. Saakashvili, who came to power in Georgia promising the restoration of unity among all citizens of Georgia, regardless of ethnicity, had been attempting to unfreeze the situation in South Ossetia by means of diplomacy or armed threats and had drawn up a plan for South Ossetian autonomy. All of these were ignored by the stubborn Tskhinvali government, which insisted on nothing less than independence from Tbilisi. In the days leading up to 7 August fighting had been increasing between South Ossetian and Georgian forces and Saakashvili once again offered South Ossetia autonomy to be guaranteed by Russia.

But diplomatic inaccuracies led to the launching of an artillery assault on Tskhinvali coupled with a ground attack. “The Georgian government declared it was acting as any sovereign and independent state would to defend itself against violent secessionists and Russian aggression. South Ossetians accused Georgia of perfidy.”139 This attack was met with a barrage of Russian tanks and troops who penetrated the Georgian border and resulted in the occupation of many important Georgian cities such as Poti on the Black Sea and Gori, a town not far from Tbilisi. Though the five-day war took a tremendous toll on Georgia and the population of South

Ossetia (an estimated twelve hundred people lost their lives in August of 2008) the diplomatic implications this war had for the situation in Abkhazia were not to be ignored.

Shortly following Russian victory in the war, Moscow officially recognized both South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. As of November 2008, only Nicaragua had joined them. The war not only left Georgia devastated but presented yet another obstacle in normalizing relations with Russia, something that some in Tbilisi had hoped for upon the ascension to power of new Russian president Dmitry Medvedev in the spring of that same year. But, as Stephen F. Jones argues, the war raised the questions of “under what conditions should peoples be allowed to secede from states”\footnote{Ibid.} as well as “can states grant citizenship to ‘co-ethnics’ or others abroad, as Russia did to the South Ossetians and Abkhazians?\footnote{Ibid.} What right did Russia have to declare Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent states, seeing as how they were at the time and remain to this day a part of Georgian territory? And why did the war erupt in South Ossetia in August 2008 and not in Abkhazia, where relations with Georgians had been strained for decades? The Georgians and Ossetians have enjoyed somewhat peaceful relations with one another for the past few centuries and instability in South Ossetia seemed to emerge only after the 1917 fall of the Tsar and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. And once again, it was the Russians who were involved in the August crisis as well, having been granted all peacekeeping duties by the OSCE and UN.

Repercussions for Georgia

The Georgian economy was experiencing impressive growth until the war, which inflicted a two billion dollar wound on the country. Before the war, economists in Georgia had predicted a six or seven percent growth of the Georgian economy by the end of 2008, but as a result of the war, growth was halved. And now foreign investment, a prospect which once seemed promising before the war, is seen by most Georgians as an unlikely possibility, as most responsible
investors refuse to put money into an unstable country. Many experts in Georgia estimate that a full rebound from damages suffered during the war could take up to three years.

And Georgian trade was also severely damaged as well as a result of continuing diplomatic misunderstanding between Moscow and Tbilisi. Russia was once Georgia’s biggest trade partner but since 2005 borders in trade have been closed in increasing numbers, with a bitter Saakashvili cutting all ties with Russia following the war. Georgia is trying to sell its products in other local markets but both Armenia and Azerbaijan have very small markets with an even smaller demand for Georgian goods. Tbilisi is left with few places to turn and Russia was a very logical and convenient trade partner as it shared a border with Georgia and an estimated 1.5 million Georgians live in Russia today.

But the most important consequence of the war with Russia is not economic at all, it is diplomatic. Many Georgians now see Abkhazia and South Ossetia as lost causes as Russia has already built bases and embassies on these territories. The question remains if citizens of these autonomous regions want to become Russian citizens or if they are just using Moscow as a means of breaking off from Georgia. But it is obvious to see why Russia is interested in Abkhazia besides the fact that most Georgians argue that the imperial mindset still prevails in Russian thought. Possession of Abkhazia would give Russia access to numerous Black Sea ports. Such ports are especially crucial since Russian naval forces are scheduled to leave the port of Sevastopol’ (a part of independent Ukraine) in 2017. Moscow has indicated its intent to retain the Russian naval base in Sevastopol’ and has even been handing out Russian passports in Crimea but if Russia decides not to make advances on Crimea, Abkhazia would prove a worthy substitute for a Russian port on the strategically-vital Black Sea.

**But is Russia Really to Blame for the Events in South Ossetia?**

But although it is easy to blame the Russians for encouraging such instability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is also necessary to keep in mind that the Georgians bear an equal part of the blame for the events leading up to August 2008. It was the growing sense of Georgian
nationalism in the late Soviet years and in the 1990s that encouraged the mindset among minorities living in Georgia that they did not belong in independent Georgia and it was Saakashvili who ordered the attack on Tskhinvali. Abkhazians and South Ossetians remember the Soviet years as a time of affirmative action that guaranteed their status as peoples separate from the Georgians and perhaps they so strongly identify with Moscow out of this sense of historical memory? Regardless of the Abkhazians’ and Ossetians’ reasons for supporting Russia, it is beyond question that the August war once again reopened a wound in the fragile skin of Russo-Georgian relations.

The Termination of Russian Peacekeeping in Abkhazia

As noted above, Russia has now stationed troops permanently in Abkhazia as a result of the war in South Ossetia. These troops are not peacekeepers; they have been deployed by Moscow and have been scheduled to remain there indefinitely. In fact, Russia announced the termination of its peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia at the CIS summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on 9 and 10 October 2008, declaring that all Russian troops in Abkhazia were no longer peacekeepers but armed forces. This, of course, poses an offensive threat to Georgia, who is not comfortable with the fact that Russian troops are once again stationed on territory technically still under Tbilisi’s jurisdiction.

But is this increased Russian presence beneficial for Abkhazia? Today many of the Russian troops sent to Abkhazia are guilty of robbing and plundering Abkhaz civilians, demanding that they feed them, and stealing their livestock. In the words of Mamuka Areshidze, an expert on Caucasian affairs, it would be better for the Abkhazians if Abkhazia remained a part of Georgia because Russian troops have “turned out not be protectors but in fact executors” in Abkhazia, something Georgian troops can hardly be accused of. Areshidze sees Russian efforts in Abkhazia as a threat to the indigenous population, pointing out that “the plan for Russification of Abkhazia is not new. The Russians have been working on that question for more than a

century.” And professor of history Zurab Papaskiri, noting that most Abkhazian children don’t even know their native language but all speak Russian, supports Areshidze and argues that “Russia has not forgotten its plan, neither in the twentieth nor in the twenty-first century.”

But Russia has done much for the separatists for them to overlook the wild and inappropriate behavior of their armed forces. For example, in October of 2008 Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov promised to spend upwards of $100 million on houses, schools and shopping centers for South Ossetians. Luzhkov has spent hundreds of millions of dollars from Moscow’s city budget in many countries of the former Soviet Union and has also not hesitated to stoke separatism in many of these regions, supporting pro-Russian separatists in Moldova, building highways in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and constructing housing for Russian military personnel on the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine. Luzhkov goes about all of this, despite protests from foreign governments, arguing that Moscow is developing sister-city relationships. His actions may have tremendous implications of Russian relations with Georgia as Luzhkov has recently called for Russia to reclaim the Crimea, a territory with a majority Russian population and a Russian naval base of strategic value at Sevastopol’, from Ukraine and has resettled the once-Georgian village of Tamarasheni with Ossetians as a result of Russia’s gains in the war.

It goes without saying that Luzhkov’s activities throughout the former Soviet Union have stoked Georgians’ fears of losing significant parts of their country to Russian influence and the fact that Russia has been militarily active in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the conclusion of the war does very little to ease the Georgians’ fears. In late October 2008 Russia ratified a treaty with both rebel regions and in November announced the placement of new military bases in the Abkhaz city of Gudauta as well as in Tskhinvali with “armament continuing throughout the course of 2009.” In addition to the construction of these bases, there will also be 3,700 additional Russian troops on Georgian territory. What Saakashvili’s government views as a

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143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
violation of Georgian sovereignty, General Nikolai Makarov believes that “the goal of placing these bases is the defense of the interests of Russia and the two republics.”

And as far as the question of Russia’s violation of Georgian sovereignty goes, Russia’s foreign minister Serei Lavrov declared on 27 September 2008 in an address to the UN General Assembly that Tbilisi’s aggression against South Ossetia in the August war effectively put an end to Georgia’s territorial integrity. Lavrov justified Russia’s military involvement and continuing plans for the separatist republics by arguing that Russia’s intervention was necessary to save the lives of civilians and peacekeepers in South Ossetia. He also said that Moscow’s recognition of the republics’ independence was necessary to ensure their security in the face of unnecessary Georgian aggression. At the meeting of the General Assembly Lavrov also further emphasized Moscow’s commitment to the stabilization of the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but argued that Russian presence was absolutely necessary to accomplish this goal.

**Saakashvili’s Response**

Tbilisi has refused to let such acts and bold statements go unpunished and devised a plan to discourage Abkhazia and South Ossetia from continuing talks with Moscow. In October 2008 Saakashvili outlawed foreign investment in both republics and imposed entry restrictions on foreigners. This type of legislation was of course targeted at isolating the two Russian-backed rebel regions as well as the constant influx of Russian tourism and investment into Abkhazia since the 1991 Soviet collapse. Foreigners now face prosecution if they enter either region from Russia without Tbilisi’s approval. Tbilisi also declared both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as occupied territories that had been illegally wrested from Georgian control by a foreign state.

Capitalizing on the fact that only Nicaragua had officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, Saakashvili has also appealed to the West, namely the United States and European Union for help in isolating the rebel republics. And indeed the West stands by Georgia in refusing to acknowledge these republics as independent. As David J. Smith argues

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146 Ibid.
in the Georgian newspaper *24 Saati*, “Without Moscow, the separatist regimes have a future of about 60 seconds.”¹⁴⁷ Saakashvili’s close courtship of influential Western governments has paid off in at least one respect: he now has important allies in Georgia’s most recent diplomatic struggle with Russia and will not have to face the Kremlin alone.

**But is Russia Alone?**

As mentioned above, the only two governments to have recognized the independence of the Georgian rebel regions are Russia and Nicaragua. But does that mean that others will not soon do the same? French president Nicolas Sarkozy defended Russia’s position at an October 2008 meeting of the European Union Parliament, arguing that Russian president Medvedev had “fulfilled his promises foreseen by [Medvedev’s] plan for the regulation of the conflict in South Ossetia.”¹⁴⁸ But Sarkozy did not fully take Russia’s side, arguing that “Russia’s reaction in the conflict was disproportional, and Georgia’s actions were unacceptable.”¹⁴⁹

Russia did not gain a full ally in Sarkozy’s France but Abkhaz deputies have been busy appealing to foreign governments asking for recognition, among them are Belarus and Ireland. However, Abkhaz leaders did not receive the answer they had immediately hoped for as on 8 September 2008 Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko announced that “the time will come’ when Belarus will consider the question of acknowledging the independence of Abkhazia.”¹⁵⁰ Abkhaz deputies also see a potential ally in Ireland, as in their words, “after a long waiting period, Abkhazia succeeded in winning independence and recognition, ‘much like how in its time Ireland, as a result of a long-lived, persistent struggle of its people, was proclaimed an

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¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

independent republic." So far there has been no dialogue between Irish and Abkhaz leaders and Belarus has yet to take the question of Abkhaz independence into serious consideration.

**What Does the Future Hold for Abkhazia?**

In the days following the August war, the Russian newspaper *Vechernee Vremia* surveyed Russians polled at random on how Moscow would respond if Abkhazia and South Ossetia wanted to enter the Russian Federation. Sixteen percent answered that Moscow would refuse, twenty-one responded that Moscow would have difficulty in making a decision and an overwhelming sixty-three percent were inclined to believe that Moscow would “accept the republics into the composition of the Russian Federation.” And although both republics continue to exist within the composition of Georgia, Moscow is almost acting as if they already are Russian territories. Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov argues that Russian military operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are based on international law and that Moscow is providing security for the republics in the face of Georgian aggression. But many minds within the Georgia-allied United States counter Lavrov’s claim with the argument that Russia is guilty of its “ongoing attempt to dismember” Georgia, a sovereign state possessing international recognition.

But besides Russia’s obvious interest in Abkhazia for its strategically-valuable location, can Moscow afford adding more republics to its already massive composition, keeping in mind that it has difficulty administering the territory it already possesses? Russia is already the world’s largest state and unquestionably the world’s most ethnically-diverse, including eighty-nine constituencies ranging from European Kaliningrad to far East Asian Kamchatka on the Pacific Ocean. It goes without saying that administering such an enormous amount of territory can be a

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151 Ibid.
152 In a survey entitled “Opros: Esli Abkhazia i iuzhnaia Osetia zakhotiat vstupit’ v RF, kak postupit’ Rossi?” in the Russian newspaper *Vechernee Vremia* (29 August-4 September 2008), a poll of Russians surveyed at random is conducted. Those polled are asked how will Moscow respond if the Georgian rebel republics want to join the Russian Federation.
strain on a central government not only in a political sense but in an economic sense as well. Eugene Rumer and Celeste Wallander argue that “Russia’s size has become a constraint on the nation’s economy, which can no longer afford the exorbitant subsidies for domestic transportation and is literally being pulled in different geographic directions by the demands and opportunities of twenty-first century trade patterns.”154 So is it in Russia’s best interests to try to incorporate two Georgian rebel republics within its borders, which Moscow already has trouble administering? And Russia’s activity in the republics is also pushing Georgia to a point from where it is difficult to return in terms of reestablishing relations between the two countries.

The Future of Russo-Georgian Relations

Georgia and Russia share a very complicated history of coexistence even prior to the August 2008 war in South Ossetia and Russian military involvement in Georgia adds yet another cloudy chapter. And as a result of the war, an enraged Saakashvili formally cut all diplomatic ties with Moscow immediately after the Russian acknowledgment of independence of Georgia’s rebel regions. Many in Russia have argued that it is in Georgia’s best interests to renew relations with Russia, including the former ambassador of the Russian Federation in Tbilisi, Viacheslav Kovalenko. He stated in October 2008 that among Georgia’s primary political goals should be “starting to develop economic cooperation”155 with Russia, as Georgia enjoyed a mutually beneficial system of trade with Russia until sanctions in 2005 prevented all economic cooperation between the two stubborn countries.

Kovalenko was not the only one who believed that Saakashvili was in the wrong in cutting off relations with Russia. Former Georgian President Shevardnadze, in an assault on Saakashvili’s overly aggressive policies toward Georgia’s neighbor to the north, announced in November 2008 that “Russia is our most prominent neighbor. It possesses colossal natural resources. In order to find common ground with Russia after what has happened in the past, it is

necessary to possess exceptional political and diplomatic abilities. If I were president, I would not have destroyed diplomatic relations with Moscow.”

Referring directly to Saakashvili’s ordering of the August attack on Tskhinvali in an interview with the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica* Shevardnadze said, “I would never have done that. But he [Saakashvili] is young and impulsive. Of course he was mistaken.”

And Georgia, justifiably so, has also blamed Russia for being overly aggressive in the conflict. Saakashvili’s regime sees its Russian counterpart as guilty of igniting the August war and sees very little chance for change on the horizon. Responding to a 6 November message from Russian president Medvedev that criticized Georgia’s position on the conflict, Georgian foreign minister Eka Tkeshelashvili responded the following day that “Russia will once again continue its aggressive politics and judging by yesterday’s address by President Medvedev, these policies will not change, not only in relations with Georgia.”

But is there hope yet for bettering relations between the two neighbors?

**Summing It All Up**

As Abkhaz and Ossetian forces continue to undermine Georgian territorial integrity with Moscow’s blessing, it looks as if there is no simple answer for untying the complex knot of the Abkhaz question in Georgia. Even after the war in August 2008, rebel militiamen continued to force ethnic Georgians from villages such as Perevi, which lies within the borders of South Ossetia but has been inhabited by Georgians for generations. And Russia, despite heavy Western criticism from Georgia-friendly nations such as the United States and key members of the European Union, has indicated no intent to withdraw its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But it is crucial to understand that one party is not solely to blame in the situation that


has come to be in Abkhazia. Russia has unnecessarily provoked Georgia but Georgia is guilty of a crucial miscalculation in igniting the August war that has led us to this point.

A centrist point of view is almost crucial to understanding Russia’s role in the Abkhaz quest for separatism, as in the words of G.P. Lezhava, “centrism doesn’t reject rational compromises.” Nearly every party involved in this complicated conflict throughout its long history can bear a part of the blame. Georgia is to blame for igniting both the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia and the August 2008 war in South Ossetia, but it is interesting to note that almost every aggressive step Tbilisi has taken in its history of interaction with Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been in response to Moscow’s advances on the republics. The international community (specifically the UN) can be blamed in that it accepted Russia’s claims to be a neutral mediator in the war that erupted in the 1990s between Georgian forces and Abkhaz separatists. It also turned a blind eye to “Russia’s military operations, economic embargoes, and political warfare relentlessly waged against Georgia” while allowing Russia to maintain a peacekeeping monopoly in similar affairs throughout the former Soviet Union, including in Nagorno-Karabakh and Moldova. Ardzinba’s regime can also be blamed as he was acting purely on his own separatist agenda, forcing the Abkhazian people into a bloody conflict with no legal precedent for doing so. And the United States can also bear part of the blame for the egging on of Georgia up to the August 2008 war and the pumping of vast amounts of military aid dollars into Saakashvili’s forces, all while sharply criticizing Russia and adding fuel to a fire that needed little more than thorough extinguishing.

Abkhaz historian Gueorgui Otyrba argues that Russia is in no way innocent in encouraging instability in Abkhazia. He notes that Russia has traditionally employed a divide and rule policy in the Caucasus, playing peoples against one another. And this is evident in Russian support of Georgian rebel regions today. Otyrba argues that “today it appears that the policy is being revived in a significant way to prevent the various peoples of the region from forming a

\[159\] G.P. Lezhava. Mezhd Gruziei i Rossiei, 39.

united front against Russia."\textsuperscript{161} The information given above would certainly support Otyrba’s thesis. And Dov Lynch argues that even though Russian troops were sent to Georgia as peacekeepers in the 1990s, their presence resulted in “separating the parties, thereby entrenching the separatist states.”\textsuperscript{162} Assuming Lynch’s argument is valid, perhaps then Russia volunteered for peacekeeping in the region with the ulterior motive of weakening Tbilisi?

But the Abkhaz question is also plagued with contradictions, many of which took root only in the modern era. It has been argued that “the Abkhaz knot of today’s contradictions began to be tied in the second half of the nineteenth century after the conclusion of the Russo-Caucasian war and the forced eviction of Abkhazians to Turkey.”\textsuperscript{163} And in fact the population problem, which is a crucial contradiction in the Abkhaz quest for independence, is also a modern invention. Ethnic Abkhazians remained the in the majority in Abkhazia until the 1926 census, a decade before Stalin launched his Georgianization campaign of the Abkhazians. And it was during tsarist times that Abkhazia began to be resettled (although Kartvelians had been colonizing Abkhaz land for generations), almost exclusively by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. This left the native population of Abkhazia at a mere fifty-three percent by the end of the nineteenth century and this number would further shrink until finally reaching today’s seventeen percent.

\textbf{What to Expect}

Many on the Russian side hope that with the regime change in the United States from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, which took effect in January 2009, will come an America easier for Moscow to communicate with. Aleksandr Iskandarian, director of the Caucasian Media Institute in Yerevan, Armenia, hopes for better relations between Russia and Georgia and believes it is possible with a new American regime in place. Iskandarian writes that “in relations with Georgia, American policies will not be as active as they were under George Bush or as

\textsuperscript{163} M. Iu. Chumalov, ed. \textit{Abkhazskii uzel}, 11.
active as they could have been in the event of Republican John McCain’s victory in the election. The new administration will conduct itself much calmer with Georgia. Although I don’t think that Washington’s specific focus on Tbilisi and the provision of American aid to Tbilisi will cease or somehow substantially change. But the degree of US-Georgian relations has the potential to change.164

But although the United States undoubtedly influenced many of the decisions Saakashvili made to distance his country from Russia, the situation in Abkhazia cannot be decided by the American president alone. Solving such a complicated puzzle will require years of negotiations and cooperation not only between Moscow and Tbilisi but from the Abkhaz separatist government as well. Perhaps if Tbilisi had extended greater autonomy to Abkhazia and refrained from promoting fiercely nationalist rhetoric in the years following the Soviet collapse, the Abkhaz leadership would not have turned to Russia as a guarantor of its existence? Or perhaps if Moscow had refrained from meddling in Georgia’s internal affairs in the 1990s, the Georgians would never have seen the use of force as necessary in cementing their territorial integrity? But the purpose of this paper is not to blame one party or another for the situation that has developed but is aimed at examining and clarifying how exactly Georgia’s and Russia’s involvement in Abkhazia throughout the centuries has led us to the political standoff that all parties involved find themselves in today. As for what happens in the future, all we are left to do is hope that the situation can be resolved in a manner that is able to incorporate the needs of all parties involved without resulting in yet another devastating war that no side can afford.


