

ABKHAZIA

By John COLARUSSO

Professor in the Anthropology Department of McMaster University, Ontario

Paper prepared for the conference. 'The contemporary North Caucasus' held at SOAS on 22-23 April 1993. 0263-4937/95/010075-22 © Society for Central Asian Studies Ltd.

Central Asian Survey (1995), 14(1), 75-96

The following paper was presented in April 1993 while the Georgian-Abkhazian war was in full sway. It was intended to offer a conceptual framework for this conflict that would be of use both to the antagonists as well as to concerned members of the international community, giving background to the conflict, some, outline of its details, an analysis of its importance, and suggestions for peace. As such the paper was a document fixed in time by a specific purpose, and to have altered it substantially would have been to have written a different document. Therefore, apart from minor corrections of infelicities, I have left the original intact and have brought the paper up to date with a short postscript.

After a hiatus of nearly 2,400 years the land of Colchis is once again in the news, for there is war in Abkhazia. Not since Euripides and Apollonius of Rhodes recounted the tale of Jason and the Colchian princess, Medea, has Western attention been drawn to this beautiful area of the Caucasus. Even during the Russo-Caucasian war of the last century, most coverage dealt with the efforts of Imam Shamil in Daghestan and only peripherally touched upon the battles of the Circassians, Ubykhs, Abazas and Abkhaz, which of course is odd considering that these Northwestern Caucasian peoples carried on their fight a full five years after the Avar chieftain and his followers had surrendered.¹ For the first time in nearly 700 years, after long domination by Mongol, Turkic, Persian, and Russian powers, the peoples of the Caucasus at last are emerging from the shadows of history to take their rightful place upon the stage of world history. It is most lamentable that the emergence of Abkhazia has been accompanied by senseless bloodshed and destruction.

The peoples involved in this war are often, by Western standards, exotic; particularly so are the Abkhaz and Georgians. The causes of the conflict are complex, as are the external interests and forces grouping themselves now around it. The detailed unfolding of events is in the process of being documented, and the war itself is, at this time of writing (April 1993), still unfolding. I shall, therefore, confine my remarks to certain basic considerations which I feel make this conflict, small by modern standards though surely horrific to the participants, a virtual paradigm for warfare in the late 20th century. I shall try to identify common interests and sources of confrontation, both in an effort to point the way to a negotiated peace, and to mark points of conflict within such negotiations. My remarks will undoubtedly offend some and inspire others. I ask you only to bear in mind that I have devoted my entire career as a linguist and folklorist to the study of the Caucasus, and by that I mean the whole of the Caucasus. It would be unfitting for me at this stage in my efforts to indulge in propaganda.

Historical background

Wars are fought not merely with munitions, but with minds as well. One of the first onslaughts against Abkhazia, one initiated long before the firing of guns,² was the claim that the Abkhaz were intruders into the region known as Abkhazia. Some of these arguments go back to the identity of the Colchians themselves. Unfortunately for matters at hand, what little we know of ancient Colchis (Abkhazian Kolkhida) does not help us to decide the ethnicity of the Colchians. The name ‘Medea,’ itself looks to be Greek for ‘Guardian(ess),’ but it has a suspicious Iranian look to it. That of her father, ‘Aietes,’ appears to be built upon the Ionian Greek root for ‘eagle,’ while that of her half-brother, ‘Apsyrtos,’ could equally well be a Greek derivative reflecting Old Babylonian *absu* ‘the abyss’ or an Old Abkhazian */a-p’sw-art./ the-Abkhaz-pronoun suffix, based on an old root for mortal³ and a suffix now seen only in pronoun constructions. Clearly we are drawing near neither to Georgian nor Mingrelian, but possibly to some ancient dialect of Abkhaz. If anything can be concluded from such evidence, however, it is that ancient Abkhazia, while Abkhazian, was also to some extent multi-ethnic.

The evidence provided by antiquity, however interesting antiquity may be or however ancient the pedigrees of the modern peoples involved may be (which is the case with both the Georgians and the Abkhaz), is never of relevance to a modern war. While some conflicts, such as that in the Balkans or in Northern Ireland, may have roots that are centuries old, the practical issue of preventing conflict, or once it has started of bringing it to some sort of negotiated resolution, always involves considerations of the present, which at most have their form, that is to say they have their rhetoric, goals, attitudes, and aspirations determined by historical factors that are rarely more than several hundred years old and by cultural factors that are usually only a bit older. For no nation, no culture, no people—no matter how venerable their pedigree—remains unchanged through the millennia.

Identity of Abkhaz

As to who are the Abkhaz the answer is straightforward: they are southern relatives of the Circassians (in political parlance the Adygheans, Cherkess, and Kabardians), connected by a linguistically and culturally transitional group, the Ubykh, who were, as neatly as one could hope for, also geographically transitional between these peoples.⁴ This places them as linguistically and culturally of distinct pedigree from the Georgians.⁵ Nevertheless, many linguistic features of the Abkhaz dialects (the lack of palatal or velar fricatives, the restriction of the non-pharyngealized uvular stops to the ejective series, many loan words) tell the linguist that the Abkhaz and Georgian languages have been in contact for a very long time. Further, place names in Abkhazia mark it as having been the home of the Abkhaz for a very long time.⁶ Finally, the Georgian peoples in the 19th century did not fight against the armies of the Tsar, whereas the Abkhaz, in Abkhazia, fought against this northern power until 1864. Thus, the Abkhaz, for which Abkhazia is named, clearly are indigenous and were not under Georgian rule as late as 1864. In fact the Abkhaz did not come under Georgian rule until 1931 when Stalin subordinated them to the Georgians, and even then they were placed under the administrative rule of Tbilisi only as a part of the Transcaucasian Federation.

Simply put, a war occurs because the past, up until the immediate present, was intolerable for one or both parties. To stop a war such a past must surely be scrutinized, but crucially the future must also be scrutinized so that it evolves into a form that no longer resembles the intolerable past. Nevertheless, the Western press still occasionally reports that the Abkhaz are Turkic speaking intruders, repeating silly propaganda that may comfort some people, but plays no useful role in

easing hostilities or forging a peace. Lest we take to unravelling the world and to sending all the Europeans back to Europe, for example, we must resign ourselves to the often bitter fact that history cannot be undone and we must not allow antiquity to enter into the deliberations of peace. Let us leave remote antiquity, therefore, where it must always lie, in the remote past, and turn to the near past.

Recent history

The Georgian King, Irakli II, sought protection from the Ottomans by signing the treaty of Georgievsk in 1783, thereby putting Kartlia and Kakhetia under Russian protection. In 1801 eastern Georgia (Kartlia and Kakhetia) were annexed to the Russian crown by Tsar Paul I, followed by the western regions of Mingrelia in 1803 and Imeretia in 1804. Georgia did not fight against the Russians in the 19th century. The Abkhaz, by contrast, resisted Russian advancement from the time of their first attempted annexation in 1810. After their subjugation in 1864, the Abkhaz were ruled by the Russians in the western division of the Transcaucasian district, which included Mingrelia, Guria, Ajaria and Imeretia. As was the case with most of the Circassians and all of the Ubykhs, most of the Muslim Abkhaz began to leave their homeland, having been in part lured into various regions of the Ottoman Empire, chiefly into the Balkans. This emigration, allegedly taking the form of ethnic cleansing at times on the part of the Russians, resulted in many deaths and a heavy depletion in the population of Abkhazia. This period was nothing less than a catastrophe for the Abkhaz. Georgian society also suffered at this time, undergoing a variety of economic dislocations due to the rise of capitalism and the decline of the old aristocracy.

The Communist period

After the Russian revolution various regions of the Caucasus enjoyed brief tenures as independent nations, but by 1921 all were under Soviet rule. Abkhazia became a union republic in 1922, and was a signatory to the formation of the USSR. Georgia was incorporated into the Transcaucasian Federation, a constituent republic of the USSR, and was only elevated to the status of a union republic in 1936 as part of the dissolution of that Federation, with Georgia having passed through a bloody revolt in 1924.⁷ By the year 1936 Abkhazia had already enjoyed a decade of republican status and suffered five years as a subordinate republic, an ASSR, under the control of Tbilisi since Stalin had demoted Abkhazia into the Transcaucasian Federation in 1931. The Georgian legal claim to Abkhazia is based upon this subordination of 1931. Closer scrutiny of the legal events of this period, particularly of 1936, is most likely to show that the canonical account of subordination of Abkhazia is a misrepresentation or gross simplification of what happened, and that therefore Georgia's legal claim is weak or non-existent. Georgia will have to make a case that it, and it alone, is the proper successor state to the Transcaucasian Federation and therefore rightful heir to Abkhazia. This would seem to be a difficult argument to carry.

Abkhazia seems always to have been multi-ethnic to some extent. The Greeks of Abkhazia are of ancient pedigree, perhaps descended from the city inhabitants of Classical times. The Armenians, Cossacks, and Turks were relatively old immigrants, as were some of the Mingrelians, Russians, Ukrainians, and Estonians. Many of these immigrants helped to build up the Abkhazian urban economy and to rid the countryside of malarial swamps during the 19th century. While this period between the conquest of the region and the revolution is generally depicted as one of ethnic peace, one must keep in mind that the emigration (deportation) of Abkhaz continued intermittently for several decades after 1864 (especially in 1878), and so any strife might well have been masked. Nevertheless until 1937 Abkhazia remained populated predominantly by Abkhaz.⁸

In the Stalinist period both peoples suffered greatly, particularly with regard to the destruction of their intelligentsia and political cultures. Abkhazia further suffered by the importation of Georgian peoples into her territory; but apart from the Russian conquest of 1864 the most important historical event underlying the current conflict was the forced importation of large numbers of Mingrelians, a relocation carried out from 1937 to 1953 by Lavrenti Beria under Stalin's orders. These Mingrelian people suffered in this process, often being summarily dumped off the back of transports in the middle of villages. In many cases they were assisted by Abkhaz and other local peoples, lest they starve. As a result of Beria's actions and their own compassion, the Abkhaz now constitute only 17.8 per cent of the population of Abkhazia on the eve of the war.⁹

To lend some perspective to this figure (1989 census) one should note, however, that of the various 'autonomies' only the North Ossetian A(utonomous) S(oviet) S(ocialist) R(epublic), the Tuva ASSR, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, the Chuvash ASSR, the Aga Buryat A(utonomous) R(egion), and the Komi-Permyak AR enjoyed an indigenous ethnic majority within their borders and that the Karelian ASSR (10.0 per cent), the Jewish AP(rovince) (4.2 per cent), the Khakass AP (11.1 per cent), the Koryak AR (16.5 per cent), the Nenets AR (11.9 per cent), the Taimyr (Dolgan-Nenets) AR (Dolgan 8.9 per cent, Nenets 4.8 per cent), the Khanty-Mansi AR (Khanti 0.9 per cent, Mansi 0.5 per cent), the Chukchi AR (7.3 per cent), the Evenki AR (14.0 per cent), and the Yamal-Nenets AR (4.2 per cent)¹⁰ fall below Abkhazia. Thus, the 17.8 per cent figure for Abkhaz, though woeful for the Abkhaz, is by no means unusual by Soviet measures. Beria's actions were then bolstered by policies administered by Tbilisi that were designed to keep the Abkhaz themselves as a rural, village population. Such a tendency to rural life was a common consequence of Soviet policy in most of the republics, but there are some numbers to suggest that the Abkhaz, on a per capita basis, were among the most economically deprived and rurally restricted of all the peoples of the USSR.¹¹ The Abkhaz generally see this as a form of Georgian suppression, an effort at Georgianization, and while certainly this was the effect of the policies implemented from Tbilisi by Georgians one must not lose sight of the fact that Tbilisi was simply following Soviet minority policy in general for a minority that was disfavoured.

Recent events

The 1970s saw some reform initiated from Moscow in response to pressure from the Abkhaz which were intended to improve the lot of this people, for example, legalization of publishing, the establishment of cultural institutions, and the establishment of Abkhaz quotas for the parliament. These reforms were implemented by Shevardnadze, then boss of the Communist Party of Georgia. Whether by design or accident the 1970s also saw foolhardy efforts on the part of Moscow to suppress Georgian as a national language. These efforts resulted in riots in Tbilisi and elsewhere, with concomitant loss of life. The net effect was to enhance any sense of threat or any resentment the Georgians (and Mingrelians) may have felt at the improved lot of the Abkhaz.

Thus the events of the last few years were preceded by the formation of two frames of mind, in some ways different and in others similar. The Abkhaz had seen their heritage and identity threatened with genuine extinction, by at first war and emigration or deportation, then by frequently forced immigration of Mingrelians, and finally by economic and social deprivation. As most of their kinsmen from the north of the Caucasion massif have already come to realize, the Abkhaz now know that they must federate with other peoples to survive, and if possible to repatriate some of the Abkhaz of the diaspora. The Georgian experience, apart from that of the ghastly Stalinist purges, was similar to that of their previous history. Solidarity with similar peoples, the Mingrelians and Svans, the various Georgian-speaking highlanders, and strict support of things Georgian were seen as the traditional means of surviving in a sea of hostile forces. Little had happened to alter that ancient view. The Abkhaz saw the Georgians as instruments of Moscow's genocidal trend, while

the Georgians saw the Abkhaz, as well as the Ossetians, Armenians, Greeks, and others, as precisely that: others, and therefore hostile and dangerous to things Georgian. Stalin's legacy to Georgia was to have brought alien peoples within its borders. Stalin's legacy to the Abkhaz was to obliterate them both demographically and politically.

Thus the immediate cause for this war reaches back to the policies of a dictator who was intent on weakening all traditional autonomies within his realm, virtually a universal practice of all empires. The immediate causes are, therefore, less than 63 years old, and their immediate preconditions, the conquest annexation of the Caucasus, are less than 200 years old. The injuries, the wrongs that must be addressed, are therefore not matters of hopelessly remote antiquity, but are accessible, solvable features that fall within living memory and recent record.

Prelude to the war

The actual events leading up to hostilities are quite straightforward and again are a matter of record. Curiously, however, through both propaganda and laziness, the succession of events is generally omitted or misrepresented. Soviet troops suppressed a riot in Tbilisi in April 1989 with the deaths of 20 demonstrators and the wounding of more than 400.¹² This initiated a process in Georgia that led to strong secessionist movements, culminating in a declaration of independence from the USSR in April 1991 under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who had come to prominence the previous October and was eventually elected President in May. Ironically, given earlier riots to protect the linguistic status of their own language, the Georgians initiated a Georgian language requirement as part of the Abkhaz University entrance requirements despite the fact that virtually no Abkhaz had any command of the language. Quite reasonably, both as a prudent expression of loyalty to what was then still perceived as a powerful and potentially vengeful centre and as a reaction against the virulent nationalism espoused early on by Gamsakhurdia, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia dissociated themselves from this declaration of independence, South Ossetia by attempting to federate with North Ossetia, and Abkhazia by declaring independence from Georgia on 25 August 1990.¹³ To see the actions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in a broader context one must recall that other autonomous republics issued declarations of independence in preparation for the 17 March 1991 all-Union referendum on a new Union treaty.¹⁴ The Gamsakhurdia regime immediately rescinded both moves from the South Ossetian and Abkhazian parliaments, despite signs from Moscow that hinted at acquiescing in them. All internal boundaries within Georgia were nullified and a bloody war was begun against the South Ossetians in January 1991 as part of Gamsakhurdia's nationalist campaign and as a product of his ever more violent and erratic behaviour. Gamsakhurdia's own political evolution led to his downfall at the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992, with the regime of Sigua-Kitovani-Ioseliani assuming power after intensive fighting in the centre of Tbilisi. Seats of Gamsakhurdia power still lingered on in Mingrelia in the west and in Kakhetia in the east. Meanwhile the Soviet Union had collapsed and been succeeded by the CIS a nebulous entity which Georgia declined to join, an act that was quite consistent with Georgia's exclusivist historical frame of mind. Eduard Shevardnadze was brought to Tbilisi in March 1992, whereupon most Western governments immediately recognized Georgia as a nation, a recognition that had been denied to it under the democratically elected Gamsakhurdia, though to have granted recognition to Georgia under Gamsakhurdia would have been to support the disintegration of the USSR at a time when it was by no means apparent that it was about to collapse.

Abkhazian response

With the Soviet Union gone, Georgia proceeded to adopt its constitution of 1921, which made no reference to Abkhazia, of course. Abkhazia saw the adoption of this constitution, together with the

earlier nullification of its border with Georgia, as a further down-grading of its already intolerable status. In response it chose not to secede, but rather to adopt its own constitution of 1925 and thereupon to seek a federative relationship with Georgia, an act that not only reflected the Abkhaz frame of mind which sought links with others as a means of gaining strength but also one that reflected a desire to maintain ties with its large compatriot, Georgia proper.

Such federation required a simple majority for ratification by the Abkhazian Parliament. The Parliament had been deadlocked by prior efforts to institute a repatriation programme of diaspora Abkhaz, similar to one begun in the Circassian republics in June of 1991 for diaspora Circassians.¹⁵ These efforts froze the Georgian (Mingrelian) members of Parliament into a plurality bloc of 46 per cent opposed to whatever the majority 54 per cent, consisting of Abkhaz, Russians, Cossacks, Greeks, Ukrainians, Estonians, and Armenians, endorsed. This opposition was not a reasoned one, but one based upon reflexive fear, for even if all the Abkhaz in the diaspora, roughly 350,000, had repatriated and joined the 100,000 still in Abkhazia, a most unlikely event, they would have constituted no more than half of the new population of 900,000 and important votes requiring a two-thirds majority could still not have been passed over the non-Abkhaz half. When certain details of local governance, such as a bicameral legislature, were raised, Tbilisi began dictating features of government in which by and large the Abkhazians acquiesced. Only when Tbilisi put forward an official, who had been censured for corruption and incompetence the previous year, for vice-president of the Parliament did the majority refuse to go along. By this time Tbilisi had played upon the 54-46 per cent split so that the Georgian (Mingrelian) plurality was acting as a bloc to endorse Tbilisi's moves. The Parliament became deadlocked and the Georgian (Mingrelian) bloc walked out. The remaining amalgam of Abkhaz and others proceeded with efforts to initiate federative talks with Tbilisi, but when a delegation was expected to arrive from there, on 14 August 1992, it came in the form of the Georgian State Guard under General Tengiz Kitovani.

The war

As with all wars, there were the elements of disagreement, there were acts considered provocations, efforts to form some soft of conciliatory talks, and last minute treachery. The few Abkhazian guards placed at a crucial pass were quickly overwhelmed and the Georgian tanks rolled into Sukhum virtually unopposed. The Gamsakhurdia supporters, 'Zviadists', had never been fully pacified in Mingrelia. Some Georgian cabinet ministers had been kidnapped and taken there. To the north Zviadists had severed the rail line several times. By international standards, clearly understood by Shevardnadze, the Georgians acted to free their cabinet ministers and to secure the rail line. With an election scheduled in October Kitovani may have taken advantage of the situation to attempt to make himself into a hero. If Kitovani and his allies had brought Shevardnadze back to be used as a front man or puppet, they must have found him a formidable one. In the context of personal ambitions and the politics of Tbilisi Kitovani's move seemed reasonable if not brilliant. With 3.6 million Georgians officially opposed to fewer than 100,000 Abkhaz, a ratio of 36 to 1, an ethnic cleansing campaign directed at this one group should have amounted to nothing more than a police action. Also on Kitovani's side was the West's total ignorance of the Caucasus save for the person of Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze and Ioseliani managed to pull Kitovani's troops out of Abkhazia on the 16th. The very next day Kitovani and his troops were back in Abkhazia. Whatever Shevardnadze ultimately felt about Kitovani's actions, the former Great Democrat would have to do his best to put a good face on things to save his reputation, for clearly his government did not function in any normal sense. Within a week the Georgians were up to the Russian Border and had the Abkhaz bottled up in three cities: Sukhum, Ochamchira, and Tkvarchel, with only a region around the town of Gudauta truly in Abkhazian control.

Problems and depredations

This text book case of a small war would have gone smoothly if not for two factors. First, the Georgian frame of mind, as mentioned, feared foreigners. Thus they were hostilely disposed toward the Abkhaz and other non-Georgian peoples of Abkhazia. Second, since its secession from the Soviet Union the Georgian economy had crashed. The underground economy, a direct product of 70 years of brutal, centralized Communist control, emerged as a clear political and economic force, acting with total disregard for any traditions of law or of civilization. 'Mafia' style politics had come to Georgia, as it would to other regions of the former USSR. The untrained and undisciplined men sent into Abkhazia, many of them freed criminals, inspired either by the genie of nationalism unleashed by Gamsakhurdia or by the lust for gain and mayhem bred into the Mafia mind, set about on a genocidal rampage.

Human rights violations of civilians began immediately. Not only were Abkhaz institutions, such as the Parliament, the University, the Museum, and the Institute of Linguistics, Literature and History, with its huge archive, completely destroyed, and Abkhaz civilians killed merely for bearing an Abkhaz name, but the various members of other ethnic communities were either beaten or killed: the hetman of the Cossacks and the head of the Greek community were beaten to death (though I have recently heard from a BBC correspondent that the latter may have survived and fled to Greece). Several prominent Armenians were also severely beaten, but it is my impression that they survived by sheer accident. Local Russians, Ukrainians, and even Mingrelians were abused and their property looted or destroyed. Abkhazian civilians were kidnapped for ransom and soldiers taken captive and shot. Greeks and Armenians were deported to Krasnodar, the latter over the objections of Armenia. In one bizarre twist in the tragedy the three villages of Adziuzhba, Kindigh (Georgian Kindghi) and Tamsh (Georgian Tamishi), which housed the only population of African descent in the entire former USSR, were destroyed by Georgian troops as part of the operation to besiege Tkvarchel. The fate of these unique Afro-Abkhazians has yet to be determined, though at least one survivor has been seen.

North Caucasian response

Cossacks and Russians went south to Abkhazia to avenge their kinsmen or merely to seek fortune in war. The Confederation of Mountain Peoples, formed in late 1989 to protect the Abkhaz when riots broke out between them and Mingrelians, suddenly found a renewed purpose. The Circassians, who consider the Abkhaz their close kin, merely southern variants of themselves, entered the fray. The Chechens too, sensing that North Caucasian civilization was once again threatened and seeing an opportunity to gain glory in the eyes of the rest of the North Caucasus, sent materiel and volunteers. The South Ossetians, remembering their own suffering and the aid given to them at that time by the Abkhaz, joined the battle as a national brigade, thereby bolstering their own status as a nation while helping their friends on the other side of the Caucasian massif. Diaspora Abkhaz and Circassians lent money, volunteers, and advice to the cause. As for the third Northwest Caucasian people, the Ubykh, their name is now merely one of family pedigree. With the last Ubykh speaker, Tevfik Esenç, dying on the evening of 8 October 1992, the Ubykh have become extinct as an ethnic group; but even in ethnic death the Ubykh loomed large in the minds of all North Caucasians as a symbol of oblivion. As one Kabardian princess put it to me, 'The Ubykh are dead. We will not sit back and watch this fate befall the Abkhaz. It simply will not happen'.

The final Abkhaz solution, a seemingly simple affair that could have been conducted in Shevardnadze's shadow in a matter of weeks, had turned into an undisciplined spree of mayhem against the majority of the people in Abkhazia, people who had links beyond the mountains with very formidable relatives and friends. Nevertheless, even now the media still speak of the 'tiny

Abkhaz separatist Moslem minority' trying to seize control of this wealthy and heterogeneous region, and high officials in the West were until recently still wondering why 'Russians are helping the Abkhaz'. Shevardnadze's usefulness to the regime in Tbilisi had taken on a new dimension. What Shevardnadze said, the West believed.

The Abkhazian advance and North Caucasian support

With the President of the Abkhazian Parliament and the Director of its Institute, Dr. Vladislav Ardzinba, now running a *de facto* government from Gudauta, the Abkhazians (the Abkhaz, Cossacks, Russians, and others), began to mount a guerrilla action with their allies. They began to do one of the things that North Caucasians and Cossacks do best: fight. Gradually they retook territory under conditions and odds that seemed impossible. The suspicion that major Russian support was at work became not only a preoccupation of the West but of Tbilisi as well. Gagra, up by the Russian border, was retaken as well as much of the hinterland. A short effort at cease fire and mutual withdrawal from the contested centre of Sukhum resulted in the Georgians seizing it without opposition. When talks began on 3 September in Moscow, therefore, the Abkhazians were no longer very interested in negotiating with the Georgians for fear that they would seize even more. Ardzinba signed the accord under duress when Yeltsin made it clear that Russia had put its prestige on the line. The 3 September accord was never observed and the Abkhazians proceeded to reclaim more territory as the year came to a close. By then only Sukhum and Ochamchira were clearly in Georgian control and the mining city of Tkvarchel was under prolonged siege by the Georgians.

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in the Hague documented a number of human rights violations committed by the Georgians, and noted that while clearly Georgians had suffered, no violations by the Abkhaz and their allies could be substantiated. International Alert documented the general chaos and suffering of war, but tended to follow Georgian views because of the influence that Shevardnadze had upon one or more of its mission members. Legal process and moral obligations tend to evaporate during war, so that atrocities and human rights violations become part of the course of hostilities. Nevertheless, even such grim events have their scale of magnitude and during December an atrocity was committed that proved to be politically stupid. During a cease-fire in the siege of Tkvarchel a Russian helicopter, flying out children and pregnant women of Russian and Abkhaz ethnic affiliation, was shot down with the loss of everyone on board, 62 lives. This act stunned not only Abkhazia, but both the North Caucasus and Russia. Suddenly this small war had become part of the consciousness of the Russian Federation. Fighting resumed with renewed fury and Georgia's, more specifically Shevardnadze's, circle of allies in Moscow began to shrink down to a small circle of those people who felt a direct debt to him. His enemies in the Russian Federation, and they were legion across the officer corps and among the more conservative elements of society and political culture, were emboldened. Georgia was now seen as 'a problem', the war in Abkhazia as 'a destabilizing' event on a crucial border, and a series of meetings were begun, the first in Piatigorsk-Kislovodsk in mid-January of this year, to discuss this increasingly grave situation. Further meetings were held in Moscow, but also in various Abkhazian cities. The Russians negotiated a Friendship and Cooperation treaty with Georgia, but insisted that the Georgians withdraw from Abkhazia before this treaty could be signed. At the same time General Pavl Grachev, Minister of Defence, toured Ajaria and then Abkhazia without notifying Tbilisi. Russia and Turkey then recognize the autonomy and integrity of Ajaria by reverting to a treaty of 1921. The partitioning of Georgia has begun.

The Confederation of North Caucasian Peoples (from its founding in 1989 until October 1992 the 'Confederation of Mountain Peoples'), having lost prestige during the short but bloody Ossetian-Ingush conflict, seems to have overcome initial efforts on the part of Moscow to discredit or neutralize it and to have emerged as a 'non-political' organization of 'peoples', with a 'legitimate

claim to representing the cultural interests of the North Caucasians'. This group changed its name in January to the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples, thereby distancing itself from a geographic venue and acknowledging that the so-called 'North' Caucasus spills over the mountain massif to the south at three points, Abkhazia, South Ossetia down into Kakhetia, and in southern Daghestan with the Lezgis, Tsakhurs, Budugs, Khinalugs, Kryz, Jeks, Haputs and Udins of Azerbaijan. (In April it changed its name simply to the 'Caucasian Confederation'.) The Confederation met in Abkhazia and reaffirmed its commitment to its hosts. More significantly, at or about the same time the Cossacks were reinstated by Moscow to their previous position as a legitimate social and military entity. The first thing the Cossacks of South Russia did was to use their newly regained status to negotiate a friendship treaty with the Caucasian Confederation, holding their first meeting in Pitsunda, Abkhazia, this April, and insisting that Abkhazia be a signatory to the final treaty, which is to be signed on May first. The President of the International Circassian Association, the noted jurist Yuri Kalmykov, a Kabardian Circassian, warned Shevardnadze that if a general mobilization were instituted in Georgia, he would respond by calling upon all the diaspora Circassians to take up arms against Georgia. Given the probity of Dr. Kalmykov this warning must be viewed very seriously. Far from finding disfavour with Moscow for this action, Dr. Kalmykov had recently become Acting Minister of Justice for the Russian Federation. Abkhazia, with the help of Abkhaz Americans, sent missions to Washington, London, and the UN. Thanks to these efforts the Abkhaz and Abkhazia, as well as the whole of the North Caucasus, are no longer mere names to the West. In February the Georgian Abkhazian conflict was one of several discussed at the Carter Centre, with President Carter himself taking a personal interest in the Caucasus. One result of this 'International Negotiation Network Consultation' was an agreement between the Abkhazians and Georgians to enter into exploratory talks. Other organizations now view the Caucasus with concern, such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki), the United Nations in New York and its Department of Humanitarian Affairs in Geneva, the CSCB High Commissioner on National Minorities in the Hague, and the Search for Common Ground in Washington.

The mid-game of the war

Within Abkhazia the thrust of the war has come to centre around Sukhum. Shevardnadze himself appears to have taken over direct control of the defence of the city, having brought in an able general from Ukraine, one Anatoli Kamkamidze. This direct control can only be seen as a favourable development. Under these conditions the Georgian troops may actually do what Shevardnadze tells them to do. The battle for Sukhum has to date been a standoff, but more recently guerrilla activity on the part of the Abkhazians has resumed to the south of Sukhum with apparently strong effects. Within Georgia the population has become disaffected with the war and with the chaos. Tbilisi has had to try to conscript resident Ossetians, Armenians, and Azeris to serve on the front lines. As one might imagine, this has not been an effective policy. Unrest in Mingrelia apparently has increased, and threats to invade South Ossetia after the peace keepers withdraw at the end of May have again been made by Tbilisi. North Ossetia has now agreed to federate with South Ossetia, so that renewed hostilities in this arena would have an entirely different tone from those of 1991-92.

Further afield, Russian parties have been aggrieved by the persistent Georgian habit of shelling close to the Russian bases in Abkhazia, even going so far as to down a Russian SU-27 with the loss of its pilot, and by the persistent Georgian rhetoric, most of it from Shevardnadze himself, accusing the Russians of aiding the Abkhazians. The Russian seismology laboratory in Lower (*Nizhnyaya*) Eshera, a suburb of Sukhum, was bombed three times by Georgian fighters even after the Russians had guided a Georgian inspection team through its surface buildings (the facility itself extends hundreds of feet below ground) and showed them that they were abandoned. It is currently under

routine shelling by the Georgian forces despite the fact that it is still being guarded by the Russian 901st paratrooper battalion. Shevardnadze openly speaks of 'war with Russia' and sporadically insists that all Russian troops leave Georgian soil immediately, rather than by the end of 1995. Shevardnadze further exacerbated his relationship with Russia by going recently to Ukraine, where he and Leonid Kravchuk signed a plethora of agreements, among them a friendship and cooperation treaty.

Early on in the conflict a prophetic quote was issued from Shevardnadze's office by Sergei Tarasenko, Shevardnadze's closest aide: 'I do not know how this situation can be resolved. Anything can happen,' (reported on 25 August).

Tarasenko was very perspicacious. This relatively small war, that by any tactical criteria should have been a minor and quick affair, has led to an astonishing array of far-flung consequences. Within Abkhazia it has caused loss of life and cultural institutions, created mistrust and bitterness, and plunged a beautiful and prosperous region into poverty and chaos, with countless peoples of all ethnic groups having fled or been misplaced. Within Georgia it has committed the present regime to military adventurism as its mandate for governance. A loss in Abkhazia or anywhere else would be a devastating challenge to Tbilisi's authority. Personal ambitions went unfulfilled: Kitovani's early stature as a hero faded so quickly that Shevardnadze ran unopposed in the October election. Further, the war has committed this regime to the nullification of internal boundaries, something in fact carried out by its predecessors and a state of affairs to which it need not have adhered.

Significance of the war

Let us look beyond the immediate conflict. The various and varied North Caucasians have gained a sense of regional identity, if not nationhood, and their Confederation has taken on a purpose. They have also become determined to send missions to the West, seeking political, cultural and trade links. The impending treaty between the Cossacks of South Russia and the Confederation is a portent of an emerging regional power and identity that will be a formidable entity on this crucial border and therefore is likely to receive Moscow's blessing.

For the CIS

Let us turn our vision further afield, but yet remain within the CIS. The Georgian treatment of the Armenian Abkhazians has set Yerevan's attention on their fellows in Georgia. The continued inability of the Georgians to protect the pipelines to Armenia from the Azeris living on Georgian territory is seen now by Yerevan as wanton indifference. Prominent Armenians have now taken an active interest in the plight of the Abkhaz as well as of Abkhazia in general. Some have even gone so far as to say that if it were not for the Armenian war with Azerbaijan, they would be at war with Georgia. Ukraine has linked up with Georgia in what at first seems an unlikely pairing. One must recall that shortly after the beginning of the battle of Sukhum in mid-March, General Kamkamidze went on Georgian television to say that Georgia would never give up Sukhum(i), for to do so would be to give up access to the Black Sea. This revealing comment suggests that Tbilisi cannot count on access to the Black Sea through Mingrelia. Affairs must indeed be unstable there. More importantly it lays out a deep strategic interest of Georgia's—access to the Black Sea. This places Georgia's geopolitical interest at direct odds with Russia's. With Ukraine at odds with Russia over precisely the same issue, the linking of Georgia with Ukraine can be seen as a substantial threat to Russia's control of the Black Sea, if not to its access thereto. If Russia can keep Abkhazia *de facto* if not *de jure*, eventually adopt Trans-Dniestria, and take back the Crimea, regardless of statements of professed lack of interest therein, then Russian control of the northern half of the Black Sea will be

assured. The general tone of support that Abkhazia has received from the more conservative elements of the Russian political spectrum accords well with this vision of controlling the Black Sea. I would suggest that this vision is not confined to the more conservative elements of Russian political culture. Access to the Black Sea is an age-old goal of Russia and will continue to be one for the foreseeable future, since it is essential to Russia's economic and military health. Furthermore, most of the old ASSRs and AOs view their failure to have gained independence at the breakup of the USSR as an unfortunate accident. It is no coincidence that Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, both old ASSRs aspiring to independence, were among the first to support Abkhazia. There are many aspiring nations within the Russian Federation who are carefully monitoring the course of this war and the conduct of Moscow toward it.

Beyond the CIS

Let us turn our vision beyond the CIS. In Turkey the government has been eager to initiate trade with Georgia and the rest of the Caucasus. Credits for Georgia have been extended, cancelled, and extended again and trade has suffered. The nationalism of the North Caucasians within Turkey has been reawakened and many are eager now to return to their homelands. Turkey appears now to accept this potential emigration, seeing in it a chance to relocate many of their Kurds into the lands vacated by the North Caucasian emigrants, and thus mitigate some of their Kurdish problem. Israel is also watching this war very closely, feeling that repatriation will be a growing wave and that this will alter the military elites of most Middle Eastern countries. Western countries have come to see the Georgian military as ineffectual and to question Shevardnadze's ability to pull Georgia into a democratic state. Many of them are now eager to meet the other Caucasians and to hear about their aspirations.

The lesson to learn from this war is that at this time in history no war, no matter how small and no matter how far removed from the familiar pale of geography, is ever fought alone. Groups, ethnic, regional, and political, near and far, will take an interest in the conflict, not out of principle, but rather because the world's economy and nations are now so interconnected by technology that there is no longer any place for a war to hide. Small events, far removed, legitimately affect the interests of numerous and diverse parties. War, even conventional war, in this tightly interlocking world, can, as Tarasenko said, have totally unforeseen consequences, in this case diametrically opposed to the goals which the war was intended to achieve. In a real sense war is no longer a reliable tool of foreign (or internal) policy, and will grow even less so as the technology of transportation and information exchange proceed to make the work economy ever more interdependent.

I feel that I have now given a fair summary of the war in Abkhazia and its consequences. Clearly this war is evolving toward a much wider, more serious conflict, one that could dwarf the present one in the remains of Yugoslavia, and spread throughout the entire Russian Federation and beyond. Therefore I shall now turn briefly to possibilities of peace in Abkhazia.

Prospects for peace

First a cease-fire must be declared and observed, hostile parties withdrawn from the territory where possible (there is no other place for the Abkhazians to go), peace keepers must be introduced, and negotiations must start utilizing mediators agreeable to both sides, perhaps the UNPO or President Jimmy Carter (or a member of the International Negotiation Network designated by him).

Humanitarian aid must be extended to all who have suffered. The cultural losses of the Abkhaz have been extensive and steps must be discussed for restoring as much of the lost materiel and

facilities as possible. Refugees must either be returned to their homes or relocated in acceptable alternatives.

In accordance with the expectations of the international community, the Abkhazians should enter into negotiations with Georgia with the intent of establishing a federative relationship. Guarantees of democratic process, legal protection, and physical protection must be established and implemented, by third parties if necessary. For their part the Georgians must understand that virtually no nation on earth exists in an ethnically pure state—that ethnic purity is a condition of a primitive level of political and social development. Further, they must understand that the world is watching now and will judge Georgian civilization accordingly. Whatever its current commitment to territorial integrity may be, the world will not expect the Abkhaz to commit suicide. The world will not tolerate another Bosnia. Should such guarantees not be forthcoming, should they not be implemented, should they not be maintained in good faith, then the world will not condemn Abkhazia if it eventually seeks independence or even union with Russia.

The Abkhazians must also learn the hard lesson that governments are made up of people and that people tend to listen to those whom they know. They, and all the other Caucasians, must continually send missions, emissaries, scholars, artists, and students to other nations so that they are no longer merely exotic names or at worst totally unknown. Shevardnadze's credibility as a propagandist should have been a forceful lesson in this principle. Leaders in other nations want to have a name, someone they know on the other end of a line, so that they can pick up a telephone in times of trouble and obtain various sides of a dispute. Today, communication is the most important activity of any government.

Further, culture and state must be separated, much as church and state were, if the future of humankind is to be viable. Georgia should encourage cultural ties between the Abkhaz and their kin to the north, and permit them to initiate a repatriation program. Such moves would not threaten Georgia demographically or economically, and would remove two of the major factors that have made the past intolerable for the Abkhaz.

Abkhazia should be rebuilt and its access to northern markets encouraged. The agricultural produce of Abkhazia has its natural outlets to the north. The Georgians have all the fruit and vegetables they could want and are not a suitable market for Abkhazia. Further, Abkhazia must not be denied the promise of its tourist industry, which is enormous since it is one of the most beautiful regions on earth. Abkhazia should be permitted the enjoyment of the fruits of its labours. It should contribute funds to the federative structure, but not at a level that renders individual labour meaningless and the lot of its people intolerable. It should be allowed external cultural and academic ties without prior approval from Tbilisi. In short, Abkhazia should be trusted.

For its part Georgia will have to make use of its great Democrat and begin steps toward true democratic pluralism. The alternative is to fall in the eyes of the world and to take Shevardnadze down with it. Non-democratic, adventurist forces within Georgia must understand that even if they win, they lose. The Caucasus, including Georgia, is entering upon the stage of world civilization and is no longer in the shadows of history. All its nations, including Georgia, are being scrutinized. Georgia and the others can only expect to have political and cultural support, foreign investment and thriving trade relationships if they maintain stable, pluralistic, democratic societies. True, one can trade profitably with tyrannies, but many nations have learned that sooner or later upheaval brings such profits to an abrupt end and wipes out capital investments. Surely Georgia sorely needs economic assistance, so that it can only benefit by democratization. Georgia, and all the Caucasus, must realize the geopolitical interests of its neighbours, and where possible respect those interests and attempt to accommodate them. If access to the Black Sea is crucial to Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia, then port facilities can be offered and various treaties can be initialled that will

not only meet these needs reliably, in an atmosphere of trust, but will also enhance the prosperity of the port areas. If certain military or research facilities are crucial, not only in terms of capital investment but also in terms of location then here too treaty arrangements can be negotiated by the parties involved, to the financial benefit of the local area. What the experience of capitalism has shown is that negotiated disputes, economic growth, and stability, whatever frustrations and problems may accompany them, lead to a gradual enhancement of people's lives. What the experience of Communism has shown is that resolving disputes by force, centralized economic control, and mass conformity to ideology, whatever the sense of perfection or stability may accompany them, is expensive, unreliable, and detrimental to people's lives.

Stabilization and accommodation in the Caucasus should lead to the region becoming a prosperous trading zone, linking the relatively cheap goods of the Middle East and Turkey, with the enormous, unmet consumer demands to the north in the CIS. The parties concerned should consider opening talks to make the Caucasus a free trade zone with no internal tariffs or duties. As a culturally transitional zone between the civilizations of the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia, the Caucasus is ideally suited as a transitional economic conduit between these regions. As a free entity it could serve the needs of these regions as well and would thus avoid the traditional pattern of falling under the influence or domination of foreign powers. At long last the Caucasus, including Abkhazia and Georgia, could have the prosperity and prominence needed to bring many of the treasures of its cultures to enrich the world.

Postscript: update to November 1994

The Georgian-Abkhazian war continued from the time of the SOAS conference on 22-23 April until 27 September 1993, when the Abkhazians retook Sukhum and drove the Georgians out of Abkhazia. During that five-month interval a cease-fire was reached on 14 May which came into place on 20 May. A three-part Russian-Abkhazian-Georgian observer Commission was mandated to oversee the withdrawal of all heavy weapons from both sides of the conflict. Russia put both combatants on notice that the first to break this cease-fire would incur stiff economic sanctions from Moscow.

In a pattern that had become commonplace the Georgian side delayed its compliance with the provisions of this agreement, whether by choice or through inability, until faced by explicit Russian threats to destroy Georgian weapons in August. This delay took place despite the public acknowledgement by members of the observer Commission that the Abkhazian side had fully complied by May. Georgia had also refused to permit the evacuation of specific Abkhaz from Sukhum who were either respected elders or prominent cultural figures, perhaps as a sort of insurance against Abkhazian attack. As one might easily have predicted from this behaviour, the Abkhazians launched renewed attacks against Sukhum in June and July, capturing nearly all the high ground around the city. Commando raids against the coast road linking Sukhum with the other Georgian stronghold of Ochamchira, succeeded in making the provisioning of Sukhum extremely difficult for Tbilisi. These attacks, in a pattern of circularity typical of warfare, 'justified' the Georgian delay in compliance.

Despite these developments the so-called 'Sochi Agreement', negotiated by 20 May was put in place by 27 July. During August both sides withdrew from around Sukhum, the allies of the Abkhazians even pulling out of Abkhazia altogether. Still the Abkhaz in Sukhum were, against their wishes, prevented from leaving. Further, after 4 August Georgia seems to have begun to 'pack' Sukhum with Georgians who had never resided in Abkhazia. The CSCE began to participate in negotiations and the UN sent its first observer mission.

The end came quickly. The defenders of the besieged city of Tkvarchel, ethnic Russians and Abkhaz, managed on 14 or 15 September to break the siege under which they had suffered for most of the war. In a dramatic example of how swiftly the fortunes of war can change, in fact undergo a complete inversion, the Georgians, soldiers and civilians alike, found themselves suddenly surrounded in Sukhum when Abkhazian forces launched a massive attack against the city. Russia immediately imposed an economic embargo against Ardzinba's regime. At the same time the glowering figure of Zviad Gamsakhurdia made a dramatic reappearance from his exile in Chechnia by returning to his native Mingrelia to the cheers of his supporters. By this move, Tbilisi's defeat was sealed. Gamsakhurdia, while vowing to assist Tbilisi's troops, in fact blocked their escape route into Mingrelia, letting them pass only if they turned over their arms. Many turned about and fled up into the mountains to Svanetia, the mountainous northern portion of Georgia.

Shevardnadze himself went to rally the defence of Sukhum. The United States Department of State sought assurances from the Abkhazians through private channels that they would not harm Shevardnadze if he were captured and that they would expedite his return to Tbilisi. Such assurances were granted by the Abkhazian Supreme Military Command and when Sukhum fell on 27 September, Shevardnadze was flown out on a Russian plane. Within a week the Georgian rout was complete, with only Svan fighters and a few support troops left in the Kodor gorge, where Svans had lived for generations. The last chaotic weeks of the war were marred by savage atrocities on both sides, often with the Georgians initiating the killing of civilians and the Abkhazians and their allies retaliating in kind. Nearly 230,000 Georgian refugees fled into Mingrelia and Svanetia.¹⁶ These placed a heavy burden on Georgia's already sagging economy and in the months to come, with the introduction of its own transitional coupons which promptly underwent hyperinflation, these wretched souls would find themselves mired in an economic catastrophe every bit as severe as the war they had endured.

No sooner had Tbilisi's troops reeled back from the Abkhazian onslaught than they then had to face the advancing troops of Gamsakhurdia. These so-called 'Zviadists' took Poti and Zugdidi, the two cities of Mingrelia, and had reached the outskirts of Kutaisi, the second largest city in Georgia, when Shevardnadze precipitately joined the CIS. While this move was unpopular in the extreme among his people, it did enable Shevardnadze to enlist the aid of Russian troops who then drove Gamsakhurdia up into the hills, where he was eventually to take his own life, and forced most Mingrelians to lay down their arms.

Diplomatic postlude

In the winter the UN started negotiations between the two sides in Geneva, with Russia participating as a 'facilitator' and the CSCE as an observer. Small dramas continued, however, to unfold. In mid-February, apparently under Russian encouragement, Tbilisi took a truculent tone toward Ardzinba's government in Sukhum and seems to have begun measures to re-invade Abkhazia with the anticipated help of the Russians. In fact a faction in Moscow seems to have assembled two large armies of North Caucasian in anticipation of just such an eventuality, with the intent of pushing completely through to Tbilisi itself. A variety of diplomatic moves were able to defuse this threat. Also at the end of February and the beginning of March Chairman Ardzinba accepted first an invitation to the UN's offices in Geneva and then one to its headquarters in New York, ostensibly to address the Security Council at the same time as Shevardnadze, who was on a visit of state to President Clinton. Ardzinba was denied an opportunity to speak and came under pressure from both Shevardnadze and the United States. Instead of buckling in, Ardzinba stormed out and all talks were suspended for a time. A lingering drama was to unfold in the Kodor gorge where Abkhazian troops continued to fight Svan irregulars and a few straggling Georgian troops. It

would be many months before the high reaches of this gorge were pacified by Russian peace keepers.

On 14 May the two sides finally signed a peace accord which contained a provision for the introduction of 3,000 Russian peace keeping troops along both sides of the traditional boundary between Abkhazia and Georgia proper, the Ingur river. For Russia this accord would lead to a diplomatic first, the eventual recognition by the UN of its role as peace keeper in the region. On 4 April, after a visit by Secretary General Boutros-Ghali to the Moscow venue of the talks, the two sides signed a declaration for a political settlement of the conflict and a quadripartite agreement on the voluntary return of refugees.

The terms for the political settlement are interesting because they may well come to serve as a model solution for the widespread problem of minorities who find themselves embedded within nation states toward which they hold no allegiance. Abkhazia is, in effect, to become a nation within a 'union state'. It is to have its own constitution, legislation, state symbols and emblems, full responsibility for maintaining public order within its borders, while the union state, whose exact form is to be determined by further negotiations with Tbilisi, will share with Abkhazia matters of foreign policy and economic relations, border and customs services, energy, transportation, ecology and measures against natural disasters, and the protection of human and civic rights and freedoms as well as those of minorities.¹⁷

The terms of refugee repatriation provide the Abkhaz authorities with the power to screen petitioning refugees for possible saboteurs, impostors, war criminals, and those who fought against the Ardzinba regime. To date repatriation has been slow for two primary reasons. First, many of the refugees do not want to go back, rightly fearing the vendetta code of the Caucasus. Second, the Abkhazians have been slow in processing applicants as a way of putting pressure on Tbilisi. For its own part the latter is also being obdurate at the negotiating table.

Problems

The Georgian team at the negotiations has been led from its inception by the warlord and parliamentarian, Jaba Ioseliani. Tengiz Kitovani has lost most of his power and has joined an arch nationalist movement within Tbilisi which is also led by former Prime Minister Sigua and a firebrand named Kakubava. Other figures, such as the outspoken Defence Minister, Giorgi Karkarashvili, have fled after being bested in intrigues and skirmishes. The promising General Kamkamidze appears to have abandoned his efforts to fashion the unruly Georgian fighters into an army after little more than a month and to have returned to Ukraine. Therefore, Ioseliani seems to face no real challenge within Georgia, and Shevardnadze chooses to stay on the margins of the negotiations, ostensibly as he should because of his paramount position.

Nevertheless, the Georgian side has insisted upon the recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity and the massive repatriation of refugees as preconditions for all further discussion. The Abkhazians refuse to link the first demand with the matter of Abkhazia's status, and refuse to accelerate the second for fear both of being demographically swamped and of introducing clandestine hostile forces into their domain. No matters of trade have been discussed; no concrete protections for the Abkhaz ethnicon have been put forward; no matters of restitution or rebuilding have been addressed. In short, none of the details of substance have been addressed that would create a framework, both conceptual and political, in which larger issues of status could be meaningfully discussed.

Having won the war, the Abkhazians are negotiating from a position of strength, which, coupled with well-based fears of renewed genocide and with their experience of Georgian cynicism, stiffens their resolve. Moreover, everyday that passes strengthens the *de facto* status of Abkhazia as a fully functioning state, and they know this. Nor is it fair to blame the presently monotonous quality of the talks entirely on a warlike Ioseliani or even partly on an aloof Shevardnadze. Tbilisi holds out hope that turmoil in the North Caucasus will eventually erupt, most likely over Moscow's precipitate actions against secessionist Chechnia, and that in the ensuing chaos Moscow will have to turn to its old ally, Georgia, for help. Failing such a radical shift in Moscow's needs, Tbilisi hopes to put pressure on Moscow regarding the presence of Russian troops in Georgia who must leave by 1995 as agreements now stands. Nevertheless, time seems to be against Georgia and her obduracy seems ill conceived, at worst a product of her exalted self-image and at best a dictate of her tumultuous domestic politics.

More profoundly, however, the fault for the deadlock in the negotiations can be traced to the present principled character of international diplomacy. It has been publicly announced that both Ardzinba and Shevardnadze may sit down at the table in mid-December in the company of Boutros-Ghali and of Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev to break what is now clearly a deadlock. Unfortunately, the Secretary General, as well as the leading figures in the West, have shown little flexibility or creativity in this conflict. All have adhered to the current fashion of principled diplomacy. In this case the specific principles of territorial integrity and the right of refugees to return to their homes have informed the negotiations from their inception. Whatever the merits of such blanket principles in some abstract sense, no conceptual apparatus or political will seems available either to bring about their tangible realization or to supplement them with tools that can address the palpable forces that both caused the war and promise to ignite it again. Russia has physically exacerbated these conceptual defects by maintaining most of the provisions of its embargo. Such a grand summit therefore seems unlikely to be held or if held, to succeed.

Prospects

This war was important for it sets the probable pattern for many more to come. While small and short, it was bitter and bloody. While purportedly inflicted upon an aggrieved Georgia, it embodied the worst impulses toward genocide and ethnic cleansing against the vulnerable Abkhaz. While confined to a new state in an obscure area, it clearly evoked the allegiance of neighbouring kindred peoples in the Caucasus and in the Caucasian diaspora. While testing the abstract principles of territorial integrity, self-determination, and the rights of refugees, it clearly served as a test for resurgent Russian interests and as a trial for Western resolve to resist those interests.

Without equivocation one can say that the West failed to resist Russian interests in this part of the Caucasus and that this failure was directly attributable to the inability of Western governments to comprehend the forces at work in this war. In turn the diplomats invested the relatively new international principles at stake with a degree of inviolability that rendered detailed investigation of local Caucasian dynamics into a task for which they were not merely unprepared or unqualified, but into something that was seen as at best antagonistic and at worst inimical to their narrowly defined professional goals.

One by-product of the war, the full significance of which is yet to emerge, is a sense of resurgent identity among the North Caucasians of the diaspora and a determination to play a role in international affairs. Nowhere else is this resurgence more evident than in Russia's old rival, Turkey, where its huge (in excess of six million) North Caucasian minority is carefully working upon a form of cultural enfranchisement with Ankara. Even people in Turkey of Ubykh descent

have resolved to resuscitate their identity and language, relying upon the efforts of four people who, to nearly everyone's surprise, still speak the language.

Without a true understanding of what happened in this war, without tangible efforts to manage its effects, and without effective means of curtailing those forces still fuelling hostility, there is little hope that the region will see lasting stability or that the international principles ostensibly at stake will be upheld. At best Abkhazia will go its own way as a nation and the region will know a tense peace. At worst a weakened Georgia will see total economic collapse coupled with renewed warfare that may well spread to other parts of the Caucasus and beyond.

Notes and references

1. Paul Henze, 'Circassian resistance to Russia', in Marie Bennigsen Broxup (ed.) *The North Caucasus Barrier*, London, Christopher Hurst & Co. 1992, pp 62-111.
2. B. George Hewitt, 'Abkhazia; a problem of identity and ownership', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, 1993, pp. 267-324.
3. I am indebted to Slava Chirikba for the etymology of this Abkhaz ethnonym, personal communication.
4. Elisa Watson, 'Georgians', in Paul Friedrich and Norma Diamond (eds) *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Vol VI, *Russian and Eurasia/China*, Massachusetts, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co.
5. B. George Hewitt and Elisa Watson, 'Abkhazians', in *ibid*.
6. Slava Chirikba, Abkhaz toponymy, Moscow, Moscow University (no date).
7. Mark R. Beissinger, 'Commonwealth of Independent States', in Joel Krieger (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp 159-165.
8. B. George Hewitt, *op cit*; Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, *Report of a UNPO Mission to Abkhazia, Georgia and the Northern Caucasus*, The Netherlands, The Hague, UNPO offices, 1992.
9. B. George Hewitt, *op cit* p 5; Anonymous author of ' "Guests" on their own territory'. *Index on Censorship* Vol 1, 1990, pp 23-25, cites a figure of 17.1 per cent. Since Soviet censuses in Georgia were written in pencil and processed through Tbilisi it should come as no surprise that a postwar census conducted of the Abkhazians along ethnic lines now finds roughly 130,000 ethnic Abkhaz, an increase of nearly 50 per cent over prewar figures that would put the titular ethnic group of this region in or near a majority of its current population.
10. *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol XLIII, No 21, 26 June 1991, p 8.
11. Darrell Slider, 'Crisis and response in Soviet nationality policy; the case of Abkhazia'. *Central Asian Survey*, Vol 4, No 4, 1985, pp 51-68.
12. Mark R. Beissinger *op cit*, p 164.
13. B. George Hewitt, 'Languages, nationalism, and the West's Response', talk prepared for SSEES, 75th Anniversary Conference, December 1990.
14. UNPO report, *op cit*.
15. John Colarusso, 'Circassian repatriation'. *The World & I*, November issue, 1991, pp 656-669.
16. Higher figures are routinely claimed, but are not likely to be accurate. This number is 0.46 x 500,000; 46 per cent is the prewar Georgian proportion of the population of Abkhazia, which was estimated at 500,000, and must therefore be considered an upper bound on the possible number of refugees.
17. In Charlotte Hille (ed). *The Caucasus Review*, Vol 1, No. 1, p 9, Leiden, The Hague; 1994.



ABKHAZ WORLD
www.abkhazworld.com