

Georgia: a danger to itself and Transcaucasian stability

George Hewitt

As the USSR was moving towards collapse, its final census (1989) counted 3,787,393 'Georgians' in Soviet Georgia. The quotation-marks indicate my doubts about the legitimacy of the decision taken around 1930 so to classify speakers of the four Kartvelian languages (Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, Svan). But, even if one accepts this categorisation, 'Georgians' only constituted 70.1% of the then-population. With a patchwork of ethnicities (including Armenians, Russians, Azerbaijanis, Ossetians, Greeks and Abkhazians), many living in compact (and even borderland) areas, the state was a perfect candidate for federalisation. But, instead of contemplating such a political structure for independent Georgia, the path fatefully chosen by those opposing communist-rule was that of nationalism, which quickly descended into ugly denunciation of (*inter alia*) the fertility-rates and lack of knowledge of Georgian among non-Kartvelians, coupled with widescale questioning of their rights to live on 'Georgian' soil. Particular resentment was felt towards the Abkhazians and South Ossetians, as they possessed eponymous administrative entities within this small republic. The powers granted by the Soviet constitution to autonomous republics (such as Abkhazia and Ajaria [Ach'ara], both inside Georgia but with ethnic Georgians of Muslim persuasion constituting the population of the latter) or autonomous districts (such as S. Ossetia) were restricted, rendering their 'autonomy' somewhat fictional. Nevertheless the nationalists wanted them abolished, whilst the S. Ossetians and Abkhazians set about forming their own national forums (respectively, Adaemon Nykhas and Aydgylara) to defend their ethno-regional interests (and, indeed, security) in the face of threats and very real dangers. Thus was the groundwork laid for downward spirals to war in both regions, and the Russians played no part in these purely Georgian-choreographed scenarios; verbal lashings across the Georgian media from late 1988 became concrete as of summer 1989.

No serious scholar doubts that the Abkhazians are the autochthonous residents of Abkhazia, reduced to a mere 17.8% of Abkhazia's 1989 population by a mixture of emigration (following Russia's capture of the North Caucasus in 1864) and calculated implantation of Kartvelians (largely Mingrelians from the neighbouring province of Mingrelia) during the repression of the Abkhazians between 1937 and 1953 by

(Georgian) Stalin and (Mingrelian) Beria (or, after the latter's transference to Moscow in 1938, the Svan K'andid Chark'viani, whose son, Gela, is the current Georgian ambassador in London). However, a deliberately manufactured myth has convinced many Kartvelians that the Abkhazians only reached Abkhazia in the 17th century and, thus, have no real right to claim the land. Resurrecting this theory in the late 1980s, the nationalists concentrated their attention on Abkhazia, and the first fatal clashes occurred in July 1989 in the capital Sukhum and Ochamchira, some 25 miles closer to the border with Mingrelia, though the quick introduction of Soviet Interior Ministry troops kept the ethnic groups apart and returned the area to an uneasy peace, which lasted until 14th August 1992.

Ethnically Mingrelian, Zviad Gamsakhurdia emerged as the leading Georgian nationalist, becoming the country's first post-soviet president. Even he charged that the Ossetians had appeared in Georgia, settling in S. Ossetia, on the coat-tails of the Red Army, which invaded independent (Menshevik) Georgia in 1921. In fact, Ossetians have been in Georgia since the middle ages at the very latest (and possibly since pre-Christian times). Gamsakhurdia mistakenly believed that the Ossetian dispute would be easily solved, leaving the thornier issue of Abkhazia for later. War eventually broke out and was continuing, albeit at low intensity, when the USSR disintegrated (1991).

Unable to win international recognition for Georgia, in contrast to leaders in other former union-republics, and exhibiting signs of megalomania, Gamsakhurdia was toppled in January 1992, thereby sparking another (but this time true civil) war between those Kartvelians, based in Mingrelia, supporting the deposed president and those backing the insurrectionists. Realising their lack of appeal to the international community, the junta-members invited former Georgian Party Boss and latterly Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze home from Moscow to become their leader.

At this point (March 1992), the Western powers committed their first blunder with regard to policy towards Georgia: motivated by a desire to do their friend a favour but in total disregard of the internal realities of the (fast crumbling) state he was at that moment illegitimately heading, Western leaders recognised Georgia *within the Soviet borders set for it by Stalin* (who, crucially, had reduced the status of Abkhazia in 1931 to that of an autonomous republic *within* Georgia from that of a full republic in treaty-alliance *with*

Georgia, as it had been throughout the 1920s), established diplomatic relations with it, gave it membership of the IMF and the World Bank, and, most prestigiously of all, admitted it the UN. Shevardnadze sensibly agreed to a ceasefire in S. Ossetia; the so-called Dagomys Accords established a tripartite (Georgian, Ossetian, Russian) peace-keeping force, providing a mandate for Russia and (notionally) still in force today. Within weeks, with the West having played all the cards that might have given it a restraining hand, Shevardnadze sent his troops into Abkhazia, undoubtedly in the (mis)calculation that his Zviadist opponents would rally to the 'national' cause against a perceived common foe. This did not happen, and on 30th September 1993 the Georgian fighters were forced into a humiliating withdrawal, the vast majority of the local Kartvelian inhabitants following them into a now 15-year exile. On that day Georgia effectively lost Abkhazia, whose *de facto* independence was marred only by the fact that one portion of its territory, the Upper K'odor Valley, remained outside Sukhum's control. A ceasefire was signed by the two 'sides' (a formal recognition that Abkhazia was not to be identified with Georgia) in Moscow in April 1994, handing peace-keeping duties in the demilitarised zone along the R. Ingur, Abkhazia's traditional border with Mingrelia in Georgia proper, to the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) force of 3,000, almost all of whom have been Russians.

Both S. Ossetia and Abkhazia, offered nothing more than a return to the *status quo ante bellum* by Georgia and the world-community, have survived for almost two decades in a kind of limbo, blockaded, lacking investment and job-opportunities, subjected to periodic acts of sabotage and terror or larger scale attempts to take the territories back under Georgian control (e.g. the May 1998 offensive over the Ingur into Abkhazia's Gal Province), and travel-restrictions (until Vladimir Putin during his first presidential term made Russian citizenship and passports available to those who wanted and could afford it); shortly before the end of his second term Putin ordered closer ties between Russia and the two regions' administrative structures, having previously opened Russia's border with Abkhazia (over the R. Psou) and lifted the CIS blockade. Celebrating the promulgation of its new constitution, Abkhazia formally declared independence in 1999, already possessing its own flag, emblem and national anthem.

Having done their favour for Shevardnadze in recognising his homeland, the West manifested no interest in Georgia, other than to offer a certain amount of aid to prevent total failure of the state; occupied with horrendous acts closer to home in the Balkans, it was quite happy for Russia to have responsibility for Transcaucasian peace-keeping. Matters began to change when excavations suggested that the Caspian's oil-reserves were larger than previously believed. Enthusiasm grew apace as Georgia became a conduit for the 'big oil' via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. This happened towards the close of Shevardnadze's presidency, which came with the Rose Revolution of November 2003. During his campaign for the 2004 spring-election, Mikhail Saak'ashvili, declared it his goal to bring the 'separatist regions' back under central control. This was quickly achieved with the bloodless toppling of Aslan Abashidze, local potentate in Ajaria, in May. Ossetians and Abkhazians knew what to expect.

After his election-victory, Saak'ashvili immediately started courting America in particular, placing Georgia on a pro-Western course with numerous ministers and spokesmen fluent in English and/or Western educated in his own mould. George W. Bush's White House was smitten, as were many influential voices in Washington and other capitals, especially when Georgian troops were offered for service in Iraq. The West's second major error now came with the decision to increase shipments of arms to Tbilisi and to intensify military training. Was the question 'Against whom will this weaponry be used?' ever asked? Realistically, there could be only one answer, as proved on 7th August.

One of Saak'ashvili's early actions against S. Ossetia was to close a local market on its border; though trade there was unregulated and untaxed, it did encourage a spirit of cooperation and provided work. A pliable Ossetian was also found to head a pro-Georgia government of S. Ossetia, located in the Georgian-populated part of the territory. In Abkhazia military personnel were somehow infiltrated into the Upper K'odor Valley in 2006 on the spurious grounds of performing only 'policing' functions; they were soon followed by the transference there of the long-standing, Tbilisi-based 'Abkhazian government-in-exile'. Peace-negotiations were promptly suspended by Abkhazia's president. US Republican presidential candidate John McCain visited Georgia in 2006 and voiced his wish that 'the peoples of the disputed territories soon learn what it means

to live in freedom', betraying utter ignorance of local history and complete misunderstanding of the relations between them and Tbilisi, which lies at the very heart of current problems. Buttressed by strong support from US friends and worryingly bellicose advisers and appreciating that NATO-membership is jeopardised if territories remain disputed, the mercurial Saak'ashvili was always likely to act before the next NATO-meeting in December. That action duly came on 7th August in S. Ossetia. Saak'ashvili thereby followed his two predecessors into Georgia's hall of infamy by bringing further disaster down on the heads of not only the S. Ossetians but also his own people, initiating the fourth war under Georgia's three post-Soviet presidents. Russia's response, relatively slow in coming, was predictably massive.

Expecting similarly to feel Saak'ashvili's wrath, Abkhazia declared general mobilisation; thousands of extra Russian troops arrived by air and sea to reinforce the Ingur demilitarised zone. This was seen as the chance finally to rid Abkhazia of Georgian military personnel, and the K'odor entrenchments were bombed for two days. When Abkhazian ground-troops entered on 12th August, not knowing what resistance they would meet, they met none, for, just as over the Ingur, all that recent US and UK training had achieved was abject retreat. The quantity of munitions discovered in the K'odor Valley gives the lie to Saak'ashvili's 2-year protestation that only a policing operation was underway there. Also found was a Georgian slogan: mizani dzalian axlosaa 'The goal is very close'; recovered maps reveal the attack-plan to retake Abkhazia. Staggering amounts of weaponry were found abandoned in such bases as Senak'i; Russians have, quite rightly, systematically destroyed as much of Saak'ashvili's killing machine as they could locate. This neutralisation was absolutely essential, though the nature of its realisation is debateable. If the arming of this volatile regime was the act of supreme folly I have argued, then those who, like Barak Obama's adviser Richard Holbrooke, speaking from Tbilisi on 17th August, urge a speedy rearmament of the country are simply advocating its criminally irresponsible repetition, with all that this will entail.

If there is to be lasting peace and stability here, which should be the universal aspiration, Georgia must be persuaded by its true friends to acknowledge the error of its ways since independence. It must accept the loss of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia and recognise them. Georgia itself should consider becoming a federation (with

decentralisation of powers to the regions, including Mingrelia, Armenian-populated Dzhavakheti, and Azerbaijani-populated Dmanis-Marneuli), disarm and devote what wealth it earns not to armaments (as in the past) but to improving living conditions across Georgia proper, where many live in hardship. It should abandon hopes of NATO-membership, as that will always irritate its northern neighbour, with whom it should finally build normal relations – Angela Merkel’s declaration in Tbilisi on 17th August that Germany now supports Georgian membership hints at another monumental miscalculation about to be made by a Western alliance supposedly committed to freedom and democracy (rather than the support of states with decidedly murky records in the observation of human and minority rights). International guarantees for S. Ossetian and Abkhazian independence and security should be provided, and these states should adopt a neutral stance to be above anybody’s suspicion (Georgia’s, the West’s, Russia’s). Georgia’s territorial integrity within its Stalinist Soviet frontiers is dead. Refusal to acknowledge this on the part of Georgia and the world-community can promote only further instability, death and destruction.