THE TALE OF TWO RESORTS: ABKHAZIA AND AJARIA BEFORE AND SINCE THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

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INTRODUCTION

My intent here is to focus on two of the many instances of "ethnic" war and peace currently in progress throughout the Caucasus.[1] The two, in the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics of Abkhazia and Ajaria, which are both now technically within the Republic of Georgia, seemed to best illustrate events in the boiling cauldron of Caucasian politics. The two places are nearly identical: they are "resorts," characterized by a Mafia-permeated society, with similar histories of Islamization, Russian conquest, and autonomy in association with the former Georgian SSR. Paradoxically the current state of affairs in each seems to differ significantly. Abkhazia has been at war with Georgia, a war characterized by rabid nationalism, ethnic cleansing, and the widespread involvement of mercenaries. The conflict in Abkhazia seemed to confirm current expert opinion: the federal structures of the Communist period invariably, and often bloodily, would break up in the course of post-Communist transitions (Vujačić and Zaslavsky 1991). Yet at the same time that conflict was splashed across the pages of the Western media, Ajaria remained almost defiantly peaceful. Both its leadership and apparently the vast majority of its population remained loyal to the ideal of a federal Georgian state. Ajaria appears to parallel the politics in some more "pro-federal" ethnic autonomous regions of Russia. Abkhazia and Ajaria thus represent the extremes of the spectrum of ethnic relations even as they display many similarities.

I will investigate the reasons for this difference. At the heart of my argument is the claim that while the Soviet state initially shored up Abkhazian political power in order to create an ally against op-

posing political forces in Georgia, it suppressed early moves toward Ajarian autonomy, permitting Georgia to pursue assimilationist policies there. Moscow thus largely *created the political relevance* of Abkhazian cultural identity, while simultaneously preventing Ajarian cultural identity from becoming politically relevant. I argue that those institutions that politicized cultural identity and the privileges and discrimination bound up with those institutions created tensions with Georgia which later escalated to violent conflict. And it is the absence of those factors that prevented similar tensions from festering in Ajaria.

To be sure, Ajaris had fewer cultural distinctions to politicize; they spoke Georgian and, aside from their adoption of Islam, saw themselves as culturally Georgian. Abkhazes, on the other hand, spoke a different, though closely related language, and long saw themselves as culturally distinct from Georgians. Nonetheless, despite cultural similarities, Ajarian elites fought for territorial autonomy from Georgia—focusing on religious differences—but were unable to attain it. In contrast, in an effort to bolster Bolshevik control in the region, in the face of a potentially renegade Georgian elite, Moscow permitted a loyal Abkhazia to exist as an autonomous republic equal in status to Georgia. This status significantly enhanced the autonomy and power of Abkhazian elites. This comparative case study, then, supports the argument that Philip Roeder makes more generally for the Soviet successor states in this volume. As he argues, and as the two cases here suggest, the Bolsheviks were committed to the political recognition of language-based, not religion-based, cultural groups within the federal state. Abkhazes were thus given the status of titular nationality, while Ajaris were denied that status. This distinction made all the difference to the odds of violent conflict when the Soviet Union collapsed.

For a long period, the powerful alliance between the Abkhazian and Moscow elites brought relative social and political stability, and what Roeder calls an "ethnic machine" was created, giving Abkhazian elites disproportionate power and resources, which they doled out to their ethnic clients in exchange for support. But in the late 1980s, glasnost deeply eroded ethnofederal institutions, and Georgians used their new-found freedom of speech to launch a campaign for confrontation with the central Abkhazian and Soviet authorities. Abkhazian elites, with the central authorities on their side, raised the

stakes by launching a campaign for Abkhazia's secession from Georgia.

With the Soviet collapse, however, Abkhazian elites lost their patrons in Moscow and Georgia was unconstrained in its effort to control Abkhazia; in 1992 Georgian tanks invaded Sukhumi, the Abkhazian capital. A war broke out, and by 1993 between 25,000 and 30,000 people had died. Indeed a large "ethnic cleansing" left Abkhazia deserted and destroyed. More than half of the prewar population had become refugees.

As noted, Ajaris, in contrast, had not attained the status of a titular notionality. Furthermore, Georgian was the official language in Ajaria, and Ajaris identified politically as Georgians. No ethnic patronage networks flourished. Thus with the Soviet collapse, few incentives and few affective or material resources existed for Ajarian political entrepreneurs to attempt secession with the collapse of central authority. There was no significant rise in political Islam in Ajaria, and the region peacefully attained a large measure of autonomy within Georgia.

In the pages that follow, I flesh out this argument with a descriptive "tale" of the two resorts. I begin with a discussion of Abkhazia, tracing the cultural differences between the Abkhazes and the Georgians, the reasons for Moscow's decision to make those cultural differences politically relevant, and some causes of tension between the Abkhazian and Georgian elites. I then trace the events that led to increasingly open political tensions between these elites and the escalation of those tensions to violence as the Soviet state weakened and then collapsed. Next, I turn to a discussion of Ajaria, the reasons for Georgia's permission from Moscow to pursue assimilationist policies, and the policies themselves. I discuss the brief rebellion in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and explain why violence was avoided. In the final section I compare the two cases analytically and conclude that in these cases "ethnicity" is not the cause of ethnic conflict. If we can generalize from this account, we must look to instrumental explanations of "ethnic" conflict, explore how cultural differences become politically relevant, and examine how politicized cultural differences lead to social tensions and to violence.

ABKHAZIA

Any Old World nationalism legitimates itself, first and foremost, through its claims to primordiality, antiquity, and therefore its superior rights to the "land." From this perspective, the Abkhazes are well within their rights to their claims of cultural uniqueness. Even the most vociferous of Georgian polemicists rarely dare to deny that Strabo's Abazgi were the direct ancestors of today's Abkhazes (Inal-Ipa 1965: 107–19). Problems arise, however, when historians assume the ungratifying but much more important task of determining the exact ethnic culture (that is, allegiance) of the medieval Abkhazian princes, who, while occasionally ruling on their own, were more often tributaries to various Georgian kingdoms, as well as the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. The dynastic name of the Abkhazian potentates, who can be traced at least as far back as the twelfth century, was Shervashidze. This is quite clearly a Georgian form, although it is derived from the Shirvan-shahs, a Persian dynasty of medieval Caspian Azerbaijan. To this genealogy, modern Abkhazes offer a counterargument: the Shervashidzes had another, purely Abkhazian clan name, Cháchba, and therefore they must be considered a local dynasty that had invented a mythological foreign ancestry, certainly not an unusual thing in feudal genealogies (Anchabadze 1976: 62–64).

Still the Shervashidze princes were Georgian in their palace culture and political leanings until the late seventeenth century, when they and the subjects of their realm were converted to Islam by the Ottomans. These conversions were, however, very superficial and reversible; during the nineteenth century, various Shervashidzes shifted back and forth across the religious divide, as the Russians and Georgians struggled with the Ottomans and their North Caucasian mountaineer allies. Eventually Georgian Orthodox priests launched a missionary movement to reconvert the Abkhazes, who had "strayed from the fold."[2] This religious zeal was soon transformed into a secular Georgian nationalist effort to bring the Abkhazes back into the embrace of the Georgian nation.

The Abkhazian language—related to the Georgian roughly as Breton is to French or Gaelic is to English—was not considered a problem inasmuch as the mother tongues of most Georgians are

mutually unintelligible regional dialects. But Abkhazian did not become a Georgian patois for an obvious reason: there was another dominant language—namely, Russian. Although there are reasons to suspect that Georgian is more widely known than most Abkhazes would normally admit—especially in the rural areas of ethnic contact—Russian undoubtedly gained greater ground among them throughout the twentieth century, as a reaction against Georgian attempts to assimilate them (Anchabadze 1976: 126–27).

Kinship patterns, however, clearly distinguish the Abkhazes culturally from Georgians. Anthropologists are often fascinated by the "primeval" relic forms of kinship and associated custom-based complexes still found among the Abhazes. Indeed within this small nationality, virtually everyone is related, and the Abkhazes find it easy to establish their genealogical connections through delightful and picturesque ritual conversations, normally conducted over a well-set table.[3] Most Georgians, on the other hand, establish their identity not through kinship clans and village communities, but rather through their historical provinces related to the dialects and principalities of medieval Georgia. No expert in Caucasian affairs would fail to mention this as an important difference. But cultural differences were certainly not as central to an explanation of the tension between the Abkhazes and the Georgians as the relationship between the Abkhazian elite and those in power in Moscow.

POLITICIZING CULTURAL IDENTITY

The existence of contemporary Abkhazia as a separate administrative unit with a proper ethnic identity is largely an outcome of the historical events of 1917–21. Ironically the promotion of the Abkhazian *national* cause was carried out by the *internationalist* Bolsheviks. In 1918, during their struggle against the Georgian Social Democratic regime, local Bolsheviks under the leadership of an Abkhaz, Nestor Lakoba, capitalized on agrarian disturbances and the emergence of *kiaraz,* Abkhazian peasant self-defense militias, to demand autonomy (Dzidzaria 1971; Lakoba 1987: 3–8). Georgian Social Democrats granted this right to Abkhazia within the framework of a Georgian Democratic Republic. In the 1920s the Bolsheviks made the same allowances when, under Lakoba's leadership, Abkhazia existed as a

Soviet republic equal in status to Georgia while united with the latter under the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation (Dzidzaria, ed. 1967: 174–75; Inal-Ipa 1965: 174–77). This status (although couched in typically ambiguous Soviet legal terms) was written into Abkhazia's constitution of 1925, whose unilateral restoration in the summer of 1992 became a pretext for the current war with Georgia. Thus with the 1925 constitution began the institutionalization of Abkhazian political identity. Two other factors—Moscow's recognition of the Abkhazian language as one separate from Georgian and its policy of preferential treatment for Abkhazian peasants—both reinforced this separate political identity and created increasing tensions with Georgia.

In this respect, Nestor Lakoba looms large in Abkhazia's fortunes under Bolshevism. One of the most important and active Bolshevik leaders in Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus during and after the civil war, this political entrepreneur was virtually Abkhazia's potentate until his mysterious death in 1936.[4] In the critical early years, Lakoba was powerful enough to resist the use of Georgian as the official language in Abkhazia without being accused of "national deviationism." This was facilitated, of course, by the fact that Stalin accused the Georgian Bolsheviks of this most mortal sin in the Bolshevik demonology.[5] In addition, with Lakoba's maneuvering, Abkhazia was collectivized very late—not until 1936, and in some parts, as late as 1938. This meant that Abkhazian peasants were spared the most grievous dislocations of forced collectivization, while many of the Russian and Greek settler farmers in the area, whose possession dated back to prerevolutionary times, were stripped of property ("dekulakized") and deported. Their lands were then taken over by the state-organized settlers of the new kolkhozi, moved there from Georgia proper.

The economic and demographic impacts on Abkhazia of this Georgian immigration were long-lasting. The ethnic Abkhazian population had already been decimated during the Russian conquest of the Caucasus—the largest historical trauma in Abkhazian collective memory, which nonetheless failed to divert contemporary Abkhazian nationalists from being ardently pro-Russian. Whole districts of Abkhazia were depopulated and resettled by the Russian Caucasian command with supposedly more reliable and progressive "Christian elements": Armenians, Greeks, Georgians, even Estonians and Poles.[6] Between 1840 and 1878 several waves of refugees

(*mahajeers*) left what was becoming the Russian empire and settled in what was then still the Ottoman Empire. And as with most of the other North Caucasian mountaineers, since the "final pacification" of Caucasia in 1864 and the ensuing exodus of the mahajeers, Abkhazes became a minority in their own land, settled in dispersed, discontiguous areas. After the massive emigrations following the abortive anti-Russian rebellions of 1866 and 1878, there remained very few autochthonous Abkhazes in the vicinity of their administrative center of Sukhum(i).[7] Thereafter, the Georgian population in Abkhazia grew steadily, increasing from 37,000, or 28 percent of the population, in 1914 to 240,000, or 45.7 percent, in 1989 (Anchabadze 1976: 89; *Ezhegodnik* 1991: 117). Proportionately ethnic Abkhazes lost dramatically during the same period. Today there may be more Abkhazes living in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan than can be found in the historical homeland. (Some Abkhazian nationalists, keen on boosting their numbers, would say three to four times more.) As recently as 1989 the "titular nationality" of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia hardly constituted 7 percent of the capital city's population (Anchabadze 1976: 140).

In sum, by 1945 the Abkhazes were a minority in Abkhazia but had achieved the status of a titular nationality, and through the efforts of Nestor Lakoba received all of the political benefits that that status conferred. Tensions between the Abkhazes and Georgians began to intensify as the Abkhazian elite gained increasing privileges and the Georgian population experienced increasing discrimination. As we shall see, these tensions were also present throughout the postwar period, increased during the period of glasnost, and escalated to violent conflict when the Soviet Union collapsed. It is to a description of this period that the discussion now turns.

GROWING IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD

After 1945 the political economy of Abkhazia, like that of Ajaria, was shaped by its unique geographic position in the USSR as a subtropical seaside. At first glance, it would seem that economic abundance muted the political relevance of cultural identity. Indeed Abkhazia, like Ajaria, was blessed by its location. Its coastal strips and mountain valleys became prosperous resorts, and it was virtu-

ally a monopolistic producer of such universally prized products as tobacco, wines, and tea. Moscow had to purchase these commodities from the local collective farms and small factories at preferential prices. This was true even when these products were diluted with ordinary grass or water. The amount of dilution was always subject to invisible bargaining and implicit understandings. In fact, the quality of the commodity was directly related to the social destination of the final product. There was an informal yet relatively firm agreement as to how much tap water and sugar could be contained in wine sent to common shops in Russia, to local stores (where local honor had to be upheld, within limits), and finally to those "special parties," where it was destined to be consumed by the nomenklatura (after all, to present a visiting Moscow official with a case of diluted Riesling would have been a *faux pas par excellence*).

In the aftermath of Stalinism, individual Russians (Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, or any of the other urban dwellers of the industrial north) could afford even higher prices for the privately produced exotic fruits (primarily tangerines) exported to northern bazaars. The same urban workers and cadres eagerly swarmed to the Caucasian Black Sea beaches—useless malarial swamps or calcinated drylands until the mid-twentieth century—from Anapa in the north to Batumi in the south. At its peak, Abkhazia, with a permanent population of 500,000, was visited annually by more than two million vacationers. The coastal strip emerged as one of the wealthiest spots in the USSR, conspicuously displayed in its abundance of private mansions and automobiles.

Even as the area was transformed into the Soviet Côte d'Azur, the locals developed habits and survival techniques like in Corsica and Sicily (or at least those of Isaac Babel's Odessa). Seaside Georgian towns, as well as the neighboring resorts in Russia, were transformed into criminal meccas. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these Mafia groups were quite powerful. Indicative of the criminalization of the region is that in the early 1990s, out of some 700 recognized "authorities" (*avtoritet*) of the Soviet gangster underworld, about 300 came from this region (*MN*, 9 May 1993).[8]

Urban Abkhazes were prominent in neither the tourist business (i.e., offering private lodgings to "wild," undocumented vacationers, running cafes or discotheques, or acting as beach photographers or private vendors, etc.) nor in organized crime. There was little need,

inasmuch as positions in the police, managerial and party bureaucracies, and the intelligentsia provided sufficient legal and extralegal means of compensation. Tourism could be left to the Armenians and Greeks, as coal mining and power supply (concentrated respectively in the enclaves of Tkvarcheli and Inguri) were left to immigrant Russians and Ukrainians. This particular division of labor along ethnic lines was relatively comfortable to all sides and thus, in contrast to the case of the Georgians, engendered little competition with the Abkhazes. In the 1960s, when the system was booming and settling into place, local Greek, Armenian, Russian, and Georgian racketeers, accompanied by their teenaged groupies, occasionally waged fierce gangster wars among themselves. This, however, rarely jeopardized interethnic harmony. The social and political environment was very stable, the economy was growing, and public opinion in those days had little incentive to interpret a restaurant brawl or a cadaver washed ashore as anything more than they really were.

Nonetheless, the Abkhazes (or rather their elites) felt insecure in the face of an ever-growing Georgian population, backed by Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. A lack of literacy in Georgian severely limited upward mobility for Abkhazian functionaries. Normally they could not even move to positions in Tbilisi. Their children had to study at the local Sukhumi pedagogical institute or leave for Russian universities. Thus the period from Stalin's death and Beria's execution in 1953 to the present has been characterized by an Abkhazian backlash against the Georgians. Winning back the Cyrillic-based alphabet was more than a symbolic victory for the Abkhazes. Their better educated and career-minded sons were able to gain control over key positions in the local state and party apparatus, and the relative importance of the local authorities was given an enormous boost by leaders from Moscow—beginning with Stalin himself—who regularly sojourned at state villas in Abkhazia.

Indeed the advantages of direct connections between the Abkhazian elite and the Russian elite were considerable. Abhazes controlled much of the land and the most lucrative crops, which was more important because they were less urbanized than any other group in the area (Anchabadze 1976: 146). State power, moreover, provided a mighty lever in offsetting the chronic competition from Georgian peasants.[9]

Georgians in Abkhazia experienced the moves by the Abkhazian elite to change the alphabet, gain control of key political positions, and dominate agriculture as severe discrimination. In 1978 Georgian resentment erupted in one of the most amazing mass movements ever seen in pre-perestroika USSR. The formal pretext was an unlikely one: the meaningless Moscow-sponsored campaign of an all-people's discussion of the draft constitution. Under cover of this process, Tbilisi dissidents, headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his colleagues from the self-styled Georgian Helsinki human rights monitoring group, organized their very first significant popular mobilization. But in place of what was to the vast majority of the contemporary Soviet population the abstract and alien issue of human rights, the Tbilisi dissidents began to crusade on behalf of the Georgian language.[10] In a move extraordinary for the time, Eduard Shevardnadze met with a group of protesters led by Gamsakhurdia and agreed to meet their demands regarding the status of the Georgian language. In another significant exception to the usual Soviet reaction to major crises, Shevardnadze was left in place to "normalize the situation."

In these events, the ethnic Abkhazian intelligentsia and nomenklatura—generally interchangeable and overlapping in most Soviet national autonomies—saw both an opportunity and a grave danger. They reacted to the perceived menace from Tbilisi by convening an all-ethnic meeting at a field near the village of Lykhny.[11] Some 12,000 people—all Abkhazes!—attended and many Abkhazian officials made their presence at the rally conspicuous by signing a petition to be sent to Moscow. The rhetoric at the rally was, moreover, very pro-Soviet (Slider 1985). Speakers demanded that their mother tongue be made the state language of the autonomous republic and that the republic itself be transferred from Georgia to the Russian Federation.

Not long after, violent clashes between Abkhazes and Georgians were reported in several places, some involving fatalities. When Shevardnadze rushed to Abkhazia in response to events, rumors swirled that someone had taken a shot at him. Georgian signs and advertisements were defaced, and Georgian schools stoned. By that time, groups of Abkhazes were marching about Sukhumi and Gagra, jovially brandishing portraits of Brezhnev, Soviet flags, and

mock banners with slogans such as "Armenia joined Russia 150 years ago. When shall we?"[12]

By May 1978 events in Abkhazia were so out of hand that Moscow deemed it necessary to dispatch to the scene none other than Ivan V. Kapitonov, secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU in charge of cadres and organizational work, who held a series of meetings with local officials. In keeping with the Soviet tradition of favoring Abkhazian interests, he recognized the validity of some of their grievances, especially the lack of proportionate budgetary funding channeled to Abkhazia by Tbilisi (Slider 1985). The possibility or of changing internal Soviet borders was firmly dismissed, a policy clearly designed in reference to other similar cases, such as Nagorno-Karabakh. In exchange for promises by the locals to normalize the situation in Abkhazia, Kapitonov offered a gigantic plan of socioeconomic development, estimated at the time to cost between $500 and $750 million, and hefty quotas for the Abkhazes in education and official positions. An identical bargain was offered to the Karabakh Armenians in early 1988.

In the aftermath, a few "instigators"—mostly Georgian dissidents, including Gamsakhurdia—were imprisoned, and, to provide for balance, several Abkhazian youth who had been involved in street fighting received prison terms. but Abkhazian elites received even more privileges. Previously dismissed Abkhazian officials—numbering nearly one hundred—were reinstated in their jobs and the party. In place of the old pedagogical institute, the Abkhazes were awarded a full-scale university, with a tenfold increase in faculty and student enrollment. Abkhazian television programs proliferated, additional Abkhazian newspapers and journals appeared, and it was widely assumed that roughly 40 percent of government and judicial posts were given to Abkhazian elites and their clients. Most important, a Russian from Moscow was appointed minister of internal affairs of Abkhazia; the Georgian *samizdat* later claimed that he never hired a single Georgian for the police force. The ethnic machine was clearly at work.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMIC OF CULTURAL CONFLICT

Politics cannot be divorced from economics, least of all in the Soviet case. And the Soviets sought to extract their economic pound of flesh for the political benefits they had conferred. In the late 1970s, as the Soviet economy began to decline, Moscow launched a campaign to secure reliable supplies of fruit, wines, and vegetables for the industrial cities of the north. The effort was part of a larger attempt to reduce imports and expand internal resources, as well as alleviate growing popular discontent in the face of the exorbitant prices charged by private southern sellers, who were increasingly branded "Caucasian speculators."

The pressure from Moscow on Abkhazia came directly through Georgia.[13] The measures to which Shevardnadze resorted in this instance were not unusual for this part of the USSR. Local residents vividly remember that roadblocks appeared on Abkhazia's border with Russia. Georgian police and village bosses visited rural homes, strongly urging people to sell their tangerines to state-run acquisition outlets. Prices dropped and stricter controls over collective farm property and workers' absenteeism were introduced.[14] This effort led to very genuine grievances, not against Moscow, but against Tbilisi and Georgian police authorities, both of which were perceived through ethnic categories.

As described above, tensions between Abkhazian and Georgian elites were already high. Moscow's preferential policies toward the Abkhazes in 1978—and simultaneous discrimination against Georgians in Abkhazia—had become the main theme of Tbilisi dissidents. Because of the economic pressure that Moscow exerted on Abkhazia *through* pressure tactics exerted by the Georgian authorities, Abkhazian dissidents now too raised their voices in complaint. In 1988, during the heyday of glasnost, both Abkhazian and Georgian "informal" activists, drawn from among the lower and younger nomenklatura and intelligentsia, used every opportunity to launch increasingly massive political campaigns on behalf of their own ethnic brethren. Abkhazes demanded secession from Georgia (the formal demand was for the restoration of the 1925 constitution, making Abkhazia a sovereign Soviet republic); Georgian radicals called for restoration of an independent Georgia, in accord with the pre-Bolshevik 1920 constitution.

THE COLLAPSING SOVIET STATE AND THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE

Abkhazian protests were explicitly pro-Soviet, sponsored by local officials with prominent Abkhazian intellectuals as figureheads; the Georgian nationalist campaign was anti-Soviet, led by the dissident intelligentsia, which actively sought confrontation with the Communist authorities. The Georgian dissidents escalated their campaign until eventually the Communist powerholders in Tbilisi blinked and urged Moscow to send in the army. In the tragic clash with the Soviet troops on 19 April 1989, nineteen people died, most of them women.

As a result of this outrage, the most radical wing of the Georgian nationalists, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, became the preponderant force in the republic, coming to power in the fall of 1990. Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in January 1992 by his own lieutenants, the Georgian National Guard "colonel" Tengiz Kitovani and the "head of the national rescue service" Jaba Ioseliani, both former dissidents and bohemian artists who transformed themselves into warlords while fighting the creeping wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Not even Shevardnadze's return to Tbilisi as a figure of national reconciliation and external prestige altered this chaotic trajectory of escalating violence.

The Abkhazes, whose rhetoric and orientation remained firmly pro-Soviet throughout their ethnonationalist mobilization, continued to defy Tbilisi with challenges that often smacked of provocation and probably reflected internal struggles between moderates and radicals. As a rule, those who advocated a more moderate course were former economic managerial nomenklatura from Abkhazia's Council of Ministers, mostly concerned about administrative order and property rights. The radical camp was a rather motley crowd, ranging from former members of the ideological nomenklatura to professional gangsters, from socially unstable youth to the newly made politicians of the perestroika period (including independent MPs of the partly open elections of 1989–90, journalists who had gained notoriety on the wave of glasnost, and various types of "informals" and political organizers). In a nutshell, they were people without an immediate interest in social, political, or economic stability.

The moderates argued for prudence and avoidance of the misery and destruction already evident in Nagorno-Karabakh, South

Ossetia, and Tbilisi itself. Their rhetoric centered on two arguments. First, "We are a tiny nation that cannot afford any casualties," and second, "We must be saved from ourselves before we revert back to the Dark Ages of mountaineer banditry and clan vendettas" (*SK,* no. 10, 1992). But radicals began to gain the upper hand as the conflict with Georgia spiraled into conventional warfare. This in effect pushed the moderates toward Moscow, as the Abkhazian Communist leadership found it convenient to cultivate a most unlikely company of allies. These included, on the one hand, Communist hard-liners from Moscow as well as the Soviet (later Russian) military who viewed Abkhazia as a lever against the unruly Georgians but who also had vested personal interests in their Stalin-era state dachas in Abkhazia. Sukhumi emissaries wooed to their cause such expatriate Abkhazian luminaries as the Moscow-based author Fazil Iskander, who enjoyed enormous prestige among the Russian liberal intelligentsia, and, in a huge moral victory for the Abkhazian separatists, Andrei Sakharov, who publicly branded Georgia a "mini-empire" and Gamsakhurdia a "rogue dissident."

Furthermore, Abkhazian officialdom and the intelligentsia became actively involved in reviving "ancient ethnic ties" with North Caucasian mountaineers, especially the Circassians (Adygé). The outcome was the creation of the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, a pan-nationalist movement of autochthonous North Caucasians with an explicitly pan-Islamic and anti-Russian program and rhetoric. Karabakh had Armenia, South Ossetia had North Ossetia, Russian speakers everywhere had Russia, but Abkhazia had no ethnic "mainland." Hence the Abkhazes tried to acquire as many allies as possible; as it is said, "A clever calf sucks from two cows."

In August 1992, after a period of fairly irresponsible, if not intentionally provocative, declarations by the Abkhazian nomenklatura-nationalist leadership, Sukhumi was invaded by tanks and gangs of Georgia's "National Guard." Significantly the second Georgian army in Abkhazia was formed of local Mingrels—hence their leanings toward the exiled Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a Mingrel, and distrust of Shevardnadze, an Eastern Georgian. The commander of this army was a certain Geno Adamia, a locally notorious gangster to whom Shevardnadze eventually awarded the rank of colonel-general.

The politics of alliance-building pursued by the Abkhazian leadership between 1988 and 1992 paid off heftily (although the purely circumstantial breadth of the pro-Abkhazian alliance may eventually cause it to backfire badly). With hardly concealed aid from the Russian military and the Cossack irregulars, and with Chechen and Circassian volunteers rushing to Abkhazia from the Northern Caucasus and the Middle East, the riffraff posing as the Georgian army was thunderously defeated in fourteen months.[15]

The Abkhazian victory was followed by as gruesome an ethnic cleansing as could be imagined. The scale of the current depopulation of Georgians has far exceeded any of the nineteenth-century depredations executed against the Abkhazes. Two hundred and forty thousand refugees fled to Georgia, an unspecified number left for Russia, and most ethnic Greeks were airlifted to Greece. Vacant houses in this once prized area have been offered as rewards to anyone who fought on the Abkhazian side. A few tangerines were exported to Russia in 1993, most of them reportedly harvested by enslaved Georgians (*NG*, 22 October 1993). But the bulk of exports from Abkhazia in that year consisted of war loot and weaponry.

Thus in many important ways the Abkhazian case supports Roeder's central argument. The ethnic machine was strengthened when Moscow supported its Abkhazian clients against Georgian threats. But those clients lost their Moscow patrons when the Soviet state collapsed. Roeder has argued that "a regional leader's decision to 'play the ethnic card' is constrained by the structure of accountability and support from the regional leader's principals." This account has suggested that the decision to play the ethnic card on the part of Abkhazian elites was conditioned by threats from Gamsakhurdia and the inability of Abkhazia's Moscow patrons to provide support after the Soviet collapse.

AJARIA: THE LAND WITHOUT A PEOPLE?

Ajaristan was annexed by Russia from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, a relatively late date. It was at the time a typical old Anatolian area—that is, an historically created ethnographic museum inherited from Mithridates's Pontic kingdom and the Byzantine and the Trebi-

zond (Trabzon) empires. As was the case elsewhere in the empire, Ottoman authorities ruled over this mosaic via *millets,* the state-sponsored system of religious communities. Religion was thus the main determinant of group status and the foundation of socioeconomic organization.[16] For example, Abkhazes living in Ajaria are firmly Muslim in their ritual practices, a striking contrast to the dispassionate pagan-Muslim-Christian syncretism of the Abkhazes in Abkhazia (Kopeshavidze 1985: 96–109). In their turn, "Ajarians"—who were Islamized Georgians, or rather Gurians from the medieval province of Guria, with its particular dialect—tended to associate with the "Turks" rather than the "Georgians." This became dramatically evident in popular attitudes during the chaotic period of 1917–21, when Ajaria's Muslims aided advancing Turkish armies on every available occasion, waging guerrilla war against both Russian and Georgian forces (Kazemzadeh 1951: 102; also see Kvinitadze 1985: 430–41).

There was another, purely modern factor that set Ajaria apart from the rest of Georgia. At the turn of the century, Ajaria's capital of Batumi was linked to the oil fields of Baku by one of the earliest pipelines and a railway, and it became one of the most important ports in the world. Ajaria's short-lived autonomy in the chaotic aftermath of World War I was largely due to conflicting geopolitical interests in the region. Independent Azerbaijan insisted that Ajaria, being a Muslim Caucasian territory, should become its enclave on the Black Sea, or at least an independent southwest Caucasian republic. British occupying authorities in 1919 favored free port status for Batumi, like Trieste and Danzig. Both Ottoman and Kemalist Turks claimed it their own, as did some Armenian politicians. And Georgians saw themselves as the only rightful rulers. In March 1921 Bolshevik cavalry stormed into Batumi hours before Turkish reinforcements could arrive, while the local Georgian garrison preferred to surrender to "any Russians" than to the Turks (Kazemzadeh 1951: 325). As a concession, Moscow agreed to grant autonomy to the Muslim population of Ajaristan as part of its Kars treaty with the insurgent government of Ankara—at the time the only foreign government that had good relations with the Bolsheviks.

Given the historical and cultural impulses for autonomy, it is not surprising that Georgian Social Democrat policies of land reform and cultural autonomy failed to integrate the Muslim population into Georgia. As the Social Democratic leader Noah Jordania sadly ob-

served at the time, "Even in theory our laws on land stand no chance in this realm of Islam. Antagonizing local begs and agas would do a thousand times more harm [to democratic Georgia] than leaving the peasants without land. Mohammed perhaps proved to be a better socialist in giving the land right to God" (cited in Chavleishvili 1977: 139).[17]

All of the relevant factors therefore pointed to the politicization of cultural identity in Ajaria. Nonetheless, Ajaria did not go the way of Abkhazia, with its successful bid for independence. Why not? The answer focuses on one striking peculiarity: Ajaria has no titular nationality. There is an Ajaria, but there are no Ajaris. For a student of Soviet nationalities, this is like discovering an egg-laying mammal. It is to the story of the missing titular nationality that the discussion now turns.

ETHNIC HOMOGENIZATION UNDER STALIN

We know next to nothing about the situation in Ajaria during Stalinism. Generally research on Ajaria has been extremely poor and fragmentary. Yet we know that the Bolsheviks in Tbilisi and their local comrades in Batumi, after a brief interlude in the early 1920s, unleashed what amounted to a war against the Muslim authorities and institutions of Ajaria. The stages of this onslaught were reflected in the succession of ethnic names bestowed on the Ajaris by the government in Tbilisi. The pre-1917 "Mohammedan Georgians" (or simply "Muslims") became "Ajarians" for the only time in the Soviet census of 1926, which counted 71,000 of them (Kozlov 1988: 91). Subsequently they were simply listed as "Georgians," inasmuch as no official Soviet census asked about religion. The narrowly parochial and long since sublated ethnonym "Gurian" was equally out of the question.[18]

Prior to World War I the universally popular assumption in Transcaucasia was that there existed basically just three indigenous nationalities in the region: Georgians, Armenians, and Muslims. In the late 1930s, however, Soviet authorities officially introduced a new ethnonym: Azerbaijani. Anyone in Transcaucasia who persisted in considering himself Muslim became, by fiat, Azerbaijani, regardless of language (which, in theory, Bolsheviks considered a key eth-

nic indicator), and this newly discovered "fact" was then recorded in the required passport. Paradoxically—although quite logically—groups inside the Azerbaijani SSR as distinct as Talyshes, Tats, Karapapakhs, Kurds, and Lezgins were, it appeared, being gradually assimilated, at least until the collapse of the Soviet order, when these obliterated identities resurfaced as new separatisms.

For a time, some Ajaris naively persisted in considering things like the neighborhood mosque, circumcision, and a separate village cemetery more important in differentiating themselves from the neighboring "others" than whatever teachers at school or the party propagandists had been telling them. The Georgian Communist leadership, then headed by Lavrenti Beria, reacted to such stubbornness with measures increasingly bordering on ethnocide, both physical and cultural. The drive toward national homogenization soon put before the newly created Azerbaijanis the choice of becoming either plain "Georgian" or being classified as totally alien "Meskheti Turks."[19] In 1944 the latter were subsequently removed from the picture as Georgia's "Turks" and "Khemshins"—Armenians who persisted in identifying themselves as Muslims—were deported to Central Asia, ostensibly to prevent them from becoming a "fifth column" were Turkey to join with the Nazis.

Before 1945 was therefore a time of calamitous ethnic homogenization in Ajaria. With most "foreign" minorities leaving the area from 1918 to 1921 as waves of refugees, "Ajaris," Lazes, and Christian "Gurians" gave way to Georgians. These new Georgians were largely literate in standard Eastern Georgian and increasingly secular, especially when acting in the state-controlled spheres. "Georgians" grew to become more than 80 percent of Ajaria's population in post-1945 census counts (Kozlov 1988: 91, 210). The success of Georgianization is probably best illustrated by the fact that virtually all Abkhazes living in Ajaria know Georgian, with one-fifth even claiming it as their mother tongue, compared to an astonishingly low 1.4 percent among their compatriots in Abkhazia (Kopeshavidze 1985: 122–24; Slider 1985: 55).

The apparently successful assimilation of Ajaris into Georgia and the failure of Georgianization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be attributed to different modes of forming and institutionalizing peripheral political identities. The fact that Ajarian separateness was expressed in terms of *religious* affiliation automatically gave free

reign to atheist zeal among the Georgian Communists. Their strategic goals in Ajaria could thus be classified as "the struggle against noxious relics of the dark past," not as the "development of nationalities." Thus in Ajaria, unlike in Abkhazia, the Georgian Bolsheviks could easily afford to be politically correct while pursuing a ruthlessly chauvinist policy. With precious few exceptions, any self-conscious Georgian—especially when in power—would consider the proposition "Muslim Georgian" an oxymoron; more than that, a dangerous abnormality.[20] The assimilation of Ajaria was arguably among the greatest successes of the Georgian national project. No titular nationality was established in Ajaria, and Georgians won the battle over language. Eradication of illiteracy could be conducted only in standard Georgian, certainly not in the Arabic of the Koran or in Turkish. And certainly there was no legitimate native Ajarian political entrepreneur akin to the Abkhazian Bolshevik leader Nestor Lakoba.

AJARIA AFTER THE SOVIET COLLAPSE

Despite this high degree of assimilation, Ajaria all but seceded from the newly independent Georgia, de facto if not de jure, after 1991. Ajaria currently stands as a virtually independent and peaceful enclave—indeed the safest part of what is nominally the Georgian Republic. In elections in the fall of 1990 the Georgian Communists, who were destroyed elsewhere by the shockwaves of Tbilisi's April 1989 "shovel massacre," received an astonishing 56 percent of the votes cast in Ajaria. Why the contrast with Abkhazia?

The narrative suggests that the history of assimilation is the central difference. While Abkhazia churned in ethnic tensions during the 1970s, Ajaria remained at peace. But in addition to the history of assimilation, a central factor motivating peace in Ajaria is a political entrepreneur composed of flesh and bones, guts and wits, and bearing the name of Aslan Abashidze. Batono (Georgian for "Sir") Aslan (certainly not *Aslan-bey*) is a man born to power as a scion of the local princely dynasty of Abashidze. During the Soviet period Abashidze's career reached its pinnacle with the post of deputy minister of municipal affairs in Tbilisi. (Anyone at all familiar with Mafia-permeated societies would appreciate the kickback possibilities

of such a position.) Furthermore, the man widely credited for "saving Ajaria from politicians and gangsters" regularly entertains many distinguished guests, including top Russian generals and British lords (his younger son attends one of England's exclusive public schools).

This "strongman of Batumi" came to power in April 1991, when he briefly occupied the oddly ambiguous official position of acting Ajaria Supreme Soviet chairman. From this post he engaged in a pair of self-constituting political acts—first, disbanding the last soviet in Ajaria, and second, preventing the new regional diet from convening. These were apparently very popular moves, taking into consideration mass voter absenteeism and the peculiar electoral dynamics in Ajaria.

The standard Gamsakhurdia-style explanation for Abashidze's popularity and power was the resurgence of Islam in Ajaria, one of the few of Gamsakhurdia's pronouncements readily bought by many Russians and Westerners, due to their inherent phobias whenever "fundamentalism" is invoked. Undoubtedly, as elsewhere in the USSR, there was some resurgence of religious practice in Ajaria in the 1970s and 1980s. But this phenomenon was clearly related to the general process of the ideological hollowing of the Communist state, rather than to an Islamic resurgence per se. Indeed such an explanation blatantly contradicts the data. There is no indication of even token political use of Islam in Ajaria (except for Gamsakhurdia's accusations). For instance, one of Abashidze's carefully maintained mysteries is his religious background. There are people in Batumi who will swear that they saw him in the mosque last Friday and those who will insist that they saw him in the church on Sunday.[21] Abashidze himself insists that he is nothing but a Georgian patriot *and* a "son of Ajaria."

The absence of fundamentalism can probably be explained by the legacy of Bolshevik policies. The Bolsheviks were more successful in inventing new socialist rituals than the French Jacobins, who lacked the advantage of catastrophically rapid Soviet urbanization and industrialization. Those ethnic groups most deeply involved in Communist modernization lost more of their ethnographic peculiarities than those who were not. Yet even in the core urban areas of Russia, the most important and conservative practices associated with the life cycle remained basically unchanged, though simplified

and profaned. As with most Caucasians in similar circumstances, the predominantly rural Ajarians preserved much of their traditional life, as only peasants in the twentieth-century world could. With the waning of the Soviet system, however, religion and ethnicity (which in the case of Muslim Georgians are perceived to be in dramatic contradiction) have reemerged as the pillars of identity and social regulation at the daily level. Yet it is important to differentiate between ritual religiosity and fundamentalist movements, as well as between ethnic awareness and political nationalism.

To counter growing Islamic religious awareness, even before 1988 Georgian "informals" had already begun to surface in Ajaria in order to organize "discussions" and arrange for the symbolic restoration of ancient monuments. As a result, a few formerly closed mosques were reopened as churches. The Communist authorities in Tbilisi saw little wrong in that, taking the attitude that Georgians who were not atheists had better be Christian. Batumi officials could not dare make a case of their own. In 1990 Gamsakhurdia went even further, proposing to abolish Ajarian autonomy altogether. Clearly Ajaria never challenged Tbilisi; it was Gamsakhurdia who challenged Ajaria.

To counter that challenge, Ajaris rose up in protest. A separatist movement was initiated, and tensions with Georgia escalated dangerously. Throughout the Soviet bloc during the revolution of 1989–91, a crystallizing moment inevitably occurred when people would come to the main square to rally before the building housing power. They would remain enthusiastically at the square for long hours, often for days and nights. This was always the key instance in the "deprivatization of protest," which had been previously confined by the Communist state to people's private spaces—their heads or kitchen tables.[22] Such events would become moments of truth, providing a glimpse into the post-Communist future, or even shaping it outright.

The key question to ask of such moments is: How and in what forms did the demonstrators perform the highly carnivalesque and mysterious act of becoming a community (civil society, the nation)?[23] The Armenians would turn these rallies into mass therapy sessions, trying time and time again to overcome the traumas of Turkish genocide. The Balts would sing folk songs in huge choruses or peacefully yet firmly hold each other's hands in enormous solidarity chains, thereby demonstrating to the "Soviet invaders" both their ethnic

vitality and "true" European civility. Led by clan elders, the Chechens and other mountaineers would come bedecked with rifles and daggers. Muscovites and Leningraders might have easily outdone May 1968 in Paris had they not been so brooding and atomized. In Georgia similar things took place. Georgians prayed in Tbilisi. The Abkhazes would unite symbolically with their ancestral spirits at the sacred field of Lykhny.

The Ajaris, however, broke with the pattern. Georgian threats to Ajarian autonomy quite clearly posed a direct danger to local Soviet elites, thereby setting the scene for the alliance which, for a brief but tumultuous time, became Ajaria's separatist movement. On 22 April 1990, bearing red banners, separatists came to Lenin Square in Batumi (once called Azizye Square, after the cathedral mosque which stood there). The date was symbolic in a rather odd sense, being the one hundred and twentieth anniversary of Lenin's birth. Workers' bands played the anthems of the USSR and the Georgian SSR.[24] Fights broke out with Gamsakhurdia supporters, and these soon escalated into a riot. Demonstrators forced their way into the building and demanded the immediate resignation of several local bosses who, it would appear, were mostly the old-style inept and demoralized Soviet bureaucrats who had begun to display sheepish attitudes toward the increasingly dictatorial Gamsakhurdia.

The short-lived Ajarian revolution resulted in several deaths, including that of Nodar Imnadze, Abashidze's deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet and the highest placed supporter of Gamsakhurdia in Ajaria. In Batumi's version, Imnadze took a page from Afghanistan. Bursting into a government meeting, he tried to kill Abashidze but was gunned down by guards before he could open fire. The Gamsakhurdia-controlled media simply printed unspecified obituaries.

Of course, as some Georgian observers have speculated, it is also possible that Gamsakhurdia struck a deal with Abashidze (Mikadze in *MN,* December 1993). If so, this would have made the "informal" leader Imnadze redundant and ultimately expendable. This would also explain the absence of an outcry by Gamsakhurdia's circle on what was, even by Georgian standards, the scandal of gunplay in Ajaria's Supreme Soviet. Whatever the story, there is really no need (or desire) to know the secrets of power struggles in Georgia. Suffice it to say that Aslan Abashidze proved worthy of his princely

and other ancestors (and associates), who knew how to maintain power under the Byzantines, the Ottomans, the Russians, the Bolsheviks, and the Georgians, of whatever ilk (i.e., Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze).

Since the "revolution" in April 1991, Abashidze has ruled Ajaria Fujimori-style, as guarantor that civil strife will not emerge from within (via "parliamentary demagogues") or without (via a Georgia plagued by warlordism and gangsterism). The internal "border" with Georgia is guarded by Abashidze's militia, which has standing orders to disarm or destroy any armed men that might try to enter Ajaria. The police have been granted special powers to combat crime, and Batumi today is said to be one of the safest towns in the former USSR (although it is also the case that many old-time professional criminals have long since left the impoverished and exceedingly dangerous Caucasus at their own initiative, fleeing to more favorable climes in Russia, Berlin, and New York).

Ajaria's post-Communist regime thus represents a new version of Bonapartism. Created out of the always unwieldy and now relic Soviet concept of the autonomous republic, this still unrecognized state incorporates regional isolationist interests in a highly troubled environment. Abashidze's personal authority and his claim to power are based on a consensus among Ajaria's population, comprising managerial elites, urban middle classes, workers and peasants—apparently both Muslim and Christian Georgians—and the minorities weary of rabid Georgian nationalism. Abashidze's well-cultivated relations with the military commanders of the Russian bases in Ajaria are the obvious and actively displayed source of his strength. He has also maintained a well-publicized neutrality in all of the internal conflicts among Georgia's feuding factions, as well as between Georgians and the Abkhazian secessionists. Indeed he has offered himself on numerous occasions as a mediator in these conflicts (and his family as hostages to his *bona fides*.)

The other pillar of Abashidze's regionalist regime is control over transit trade with Turkey. In 1988, for the first time in decades, Moscow began to permit cross-border passage at Sarpi, just a few miles south of Batumi. Barter trade through Sarpi—estimated at $60–70 million per month—is conducted primarily by individual "shuttle" traders from all over Caucasia and southern Russia who move items ranging from school notebooks to caviar and prostitutes.

Perhaps this is what Aslan Abashidze means when he humbly admits that "Ajaria has nothing of value except the good humor of its people and geopolitical advantages" (*NG*, 16 October 1993).

GEORGIA: L'EMPIRE IMPLOSÉ OR SOVIET-HANDICAPPED NATION-STATE?

In both Abkhazia and Ajaria the Georgian politics of perestroika clearly followed the generic Baltic and East European "anti-imperial" pattern of opposing the "nation" to the pro-Moscow "local Communist sellouts." But events in Abkhazia illustrate a clear-cut case of peripheral ethnofederal countermobilization, a phenomenon also seen in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, the "internationalist fronts" representing generic Russian speakers in the Baltic states, Moldova's rebel Gagauzia and Transdnistria, and the Crimea. In each of these, the "anti-imperial" nationalism of the dominant group was challenged by minorities—if they possessed the resources to organize. Paradoxically, perhaps, the best resource was usually the local governing apparatus, embedded in a preexistent autonomous territorial unit of some sort. Consequently the peripheral ethnic countermobilizations were invariably led by the local party/state apparatchiki or enterprise managers. The associated rhetoric would be loyalist and ultra-Leninist, par excellence. Until the collapse of the Communist order and the USSR, high hopes for an intervention by Moscow would be expressed; since 1991 the discourse of peripheral separatism (which, as illustrated by the Ajarian case, can be different from usual ethnonationalism) has changed only to stress Russia's historical obligations and "vital interests."

In Ajaria the more resolute men of property (symbolized by Aslan Abashidze in his avatar of the former Tbilisi minister of communal affairs and hence inescapably the master of kickbacks) overthrew the local "defeatist" bureaucrats in a staged popular uprising, thereby preventing Gamsakhurdia's nationalists from establishing a local base. Eventually Abashidze won an armed truce with the subsequent central government of Georgia and imposed his control over the flow of goods over the border with Turkey. This was the result of both passive popular consensus and support offered by the former

Soviet military officers stationed in Ajaria. Because cultural identity had not been politicized, the events in Ajaria were not instances of cultural conflict.

In Abkhazia, however, culture was deeply politicized by ethnofederal institutions. Radicals led by Vladislav Ardzinba had gathered momentum from the long-standing Abkhazian ethnonationalist mobilization and institutionalization and were aided in this process by increasingly violent confrontations with various Georgian forces, such as former Soviet police, peasant militias, gangsters, and nationalist warlords. Moreover, through established channels, the Abkhazian radicals received more or less tacit encouragement from the political factions in Russia's changing establishment of 1988–93 who wanted to "punish the Georgians" (these included the CPSU's Central Committee Department of Organizational Work, Communist chauvinists in the KGB and the army, especially officers with dachas and apartments in Abkhazia, the Soviet "Unionists" among the perestroika generation of parliamentarians, all stripes of Russian nationalists seeking a cause, the Soviet Mafia in the adjacent Sochi region of Russia, plus the mountaineer pan-Islamists looking for bases and a sea outlet). Inevitably the Abkhazian radicals were bound to prevail over less dashing property-minded moderates.[25]

CONCLUSIONS

The bottom line that emerges from the simplest formalization of the narratives presented here is that we are dealing with modern agrarian societies, shaped and transformed by centralized, neo-Stalinist institutions. The resulting configuration of power was largely locally bound, in collective farms, small enterprises, districts, and relatively small autonomous provinces, and permeated with Mafia-like relations of patronage and corruption. The "shadow economy" thus bred a "shadow apparatus" appended to the formal Soviet party/state.

As was true throughout the Soviet-type anticapitalist zone of fused economy and politics, undifferentiated social power was structured along corporatist lines, with one major difference: Soviet Cau-

casia, marked by the absence of gigantic flagship factories or agroindustiral complexes, so common in other parts of the union, was characterized by qualitatively smaller-scale corporatism intertwined with traditionally extended networks of personal loyalties. *Ethnicity, especially when buttressed by state-sponsored institutions and inequalities, assumed exceptional importance in such an environment* (see Arrighi and Piselli 1987).

It is this political relevance of cultural identity that becomes important when central institutions collapse. This contrasting tale of two resorts has highlighted that importance. In Ajaria, Soviet power muted cultural differences, while in Abkhazia, Moscow felt that it was in its own interests to exaggerate cultural differences. Recall that although the Ajaris fought for autonomy in the 1920s, the Georgian authorities, in an effort to expand their own national power base, purged the Ajarian leadership. Their ability to do this rested on the claim that Ajaris were a religious rather than an ethnic minority, and their religious autonomy was a threat to central Soviet Communist control. Thus the Georgian authorities were able to block the Ajarian effort to become a titular nationality because Moscow perceived it as a Communist struggle against religious political power rather than as a part of the ethnofederalist effort to forge the loyalty of diverse ethnic groups to a central socialist regime. In contrast, the es were able to obtain the status of a titular nationality in their struggle with Georgia. When Abkhazia became a Soviet republic, equal in status to Georgia, local Abkhazian authorities, accountable to Moscow and not to Tbilisi, gained access to the resources of political power. Tensions with Georgia escalated to violence in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Indeed what else besides "tribalization"—or "Lebanization," caudillismo, coronelismo, warlordism, clanishness, sectarianism, whatever it is called—should we expect when the modern state, which had once engendered this milieu for some reason now forgotten, fails and withers away?

If we accept this argument, ethnicity must be exonerated from being the main culprit in "ethnic" conflict. Ethnicity is, in other words, instrumental and not primordial. Of course, the instrumentalization of ethnicity must be somewhat credible to those being addressed and must therefore refer to a litany of more or less real conflicts and grievances—or imagined into being by the means of modern propaganda. Yet this always remains a fairly circumstantial

process that cannot be completely controlled. "Accidents" (or contextual contingencies) such as violence-waging capabilities, the degree of regional insulation enjoyed by local bodies of power, external alliances and internal cleavages, the degree of popular participation and even the personality of current leaders do make a difference.

Thus we confront an environment whose stability would be organized along more or less Mafioso corporatism—Soviet-style, of course—whose historical catastrophe would inescapably resemble the turf wars of Chicago and other gangsters of similar ilk. The present time of troubles in Caucasia should be expected to continue until some Mafia-type group, or a coalition of them, succeeds in making new states—Ajaria, Karabakh, and Armenia are close to this, and that is what Shevardnadze in Georgia and Geidar Aliev in Azerbaijan are bound to accomplish—or until an external power arrives and imposes its order. The Fourth Russian Empire looms large on a not too distant horizon.

NOTES

This paper was produced while I was a visiting fellow at the Peace Studies Center, Cornell University, under the sponsorship of the SSRC MacArthur Program on Peace and Security. Special thanks to Michael Kennedy for coaching me in the Western trade of scheme-making.

1. The possibilities include the following: (1) in the Sochi area, among Shapsughs, Greeks, and the Kuban Cossacks; (2) in some of the Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation, such as Adygeia, Karachai-Circassia, Kabarda-Balkaria, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia; (3) in the historical provinces and autonomous areas of Georgia, including Megrelia, Ajaria, ia, South Ossetia (Shida Kartli); (4) in Azerbaijan (including the Azeri Turks in Georgia and in the Krasnodarsky region) between the Talyshes and the Lezgins; and (5) involving the Armenians scattered through Armenia, in Karabakh (Artsakh), in Baku, in the Krasnodarsky region, and in Georgia.
2. Ironically Abkhazia—more precisely the Holy See established in Pitsunda (Pitiunt) in the fifth or sixth century—was the center of early Christianization in Caucasia. From 1912 to 1920 this served as the basis for an earlier Abkhazian protonationalist movement to demand an autocephalous church and Abkhazian mass.

3. "A nationality that would easily fit into the New York Giants' stadium," pronounced Melor Sturua in a rather distasteful yet typical joke. Subsequently it appeared on both the *New York Times* op-ed page and the McNeil-Lehrer Newshour in October 1993. This notorious Soviet cold war propagandist incidentally is the son of a prominent Georgian Communist leader.
4. Lakoba died after having feasted in Tbilisi with Lavrenti Beria, then Georgia's first secretary. It was widely believed that Beria simply disposed of a powerful rival by poisoning him. This notion was reinforced when, soon after his lavish state funeral, Lakoba's body was unearthed and burned, allegedly for some "newly discovered evidence of spy activity" (Knight 1993: 80).
5. One of Stalin's closest lieutenants, Sergo Ordzhonikidze (himself a Georgian and a dyed-in-the-wool Communist chauvinist), at the very Central Committee meeting in 1923 which denounced the famous Sultan Galiev brand of "national communism," calmly admitted that "With the Abkhazian republic which has no literate [language] . . . we conduct our correspondence in Russian. Had we proposed to the local comrades to write in Georgian, they would have refused that resolutely" (*IV Soveshchanie* 1992: 142).
6. The Russian population in the autonomous republic soared from 12,000 to 85,000 between 1926 and 1939, during the years of Stalinist industrialization (Kozlov 1988: 91) and was accompanied by a considerable influx of Armenian refugees from Turkey, which reached 15 percent of ia's population by 1989. But the numerical growth of these groups stopped by the 1960s; indeed the Russian population even decreased slightly, and in 1989 constituted 16 percent of the population. Unlike the Georgians, however, these groups posed little competition to the Abkhazes in agriculture and the party/state apparat.
7. The last "i" appeared on Soviet maps in the 1930s and remained a hotly debated issue before the current Abkhazian victory. It is required by Georgian grammar, but not by Abkhazian or Russian. In a perfect parallel, Ajaria's capital was called Batum before its Georgianization into Batumi, but here the last "i" has never been questioned.
8. "Avtoritet" is roughly an equivalent of the Mafia's *cappi,* though Russian professional gangsterism was never organized into "families" but was rather purely territorial. Also important to note is that the Russian criminal underworld was and remains highly internationalist—i.e., virtually indifferent to ethnicity as a status factor.
9. Peasant immigrants to Abkhazia were rather rural Mingrels, a subgroup of Western Georgians who have been continuously migrating over the border on the Inguri River for the past century. Lavrenti Beria was a Mingrel. So was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose most ardent followers and military supporters have been concentrated mostly in Western Georgia and partly in the Mingrel-populated districts of Abkhazia (especially in Gali).
10.

For an excellent account of Georgian nationalism made from the position of social history, see Suny (1988). It is unfortunate, though very natural, that Suny knows nineteenth-century Caucasia better than its more recent realities. Perhaps unconsciously he contradicts his own theoretical premises, so brilliantly employed in the analysis of the pre-Soviet periods, treating contemporary Georgians or Armenians in a socially undifferentiated manner, essentially as the unit of analysis and an agency ("Georgians wanted . . .").

11. Lykhny was once the residence of Abkhazia's Shervashidze/Chachba princes. It was also the place associated with some important pagan rituals, later a Christian center.

12. Moscow and Erevan at the time were celebrating the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the annexation of Persian Armenia by Russia, "the volunteer rejoining of the Russian and Armenian peoples."

13. In the Soviet command economy, overall top-down overdetermination had as its dialectical opposite the principle of underspecification of policy implementation and local procedures. In the proverbial expression of the apparat itself, "Communist know only one word: MUST!" Successive layers of managers and bosses, from the republic's first secretary down to the collective farm chairman and local police, were expected to "organize work" in order to "ensure fulfillment." The means were unimportant so long as they did not upset the metaphorical apple cart. In other words, to make sense of regional and local politics in places such as Abkhazia during the Soviet period, we must have some idea of what "tools" or practices local powerholders normally used to meet their goals. This question would be an especially sensitive one in a multiethnic area, inasmuch as the "tool kit" was largely culturally (that is, ethnically) constructed.

14. In 1980 *Pravda,* writing about "negative phenomena" in Abkhazia, admitted that "In some settlements . . . almost half of the able-bodied population [was], without any good reason, not permanently employed." This helps us to appreciate the extent of creeping decollectivization and the shadow economy.

15. According to a widely believed rumor, Shevardnadze himself, when addressing a unit of volunteers before their departure from Tbilisi, urged them to "show to the entire world that Georgian troops are not rapists, marauders, or drug addicts." In his turn, Vladislav Ardzinba, the Abkhazian leader and previously a soft-spoken Hittite historian at the Moscow Institute of Orientalistics, commented on the plunder and destruction of Sukhumi by his troops: "Alas, even regular armies sometimes indulge in it" (*NG,* 15 October 1993).

16. As elsewhere in the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Asia Minor, ethnic diversity was translated into hereditary economic specialization. As described in a contemporary Russian guidebook, in Batumi "Russians are mostly military and civil officers, skilled workers, and owners of summer houses. Numerous Poles and Germans [apparently the Baltic Russian subjects] work in the

businesses, liberal professions, and steamship companies. . . . Aside from the intelligentsia, each nationality lives pretty much in isolation from the others, preferring its own trades. Here Georgians are, par excellence, clerks, restauranteurs, chefs, servants; Armenians—shopkeepers, porters, cart drivers; Persians—gardeners, fruit and vegetable vendors, teahouse keepers; Turks are fishermen, boatmen, dockers, coffee shop owners; Greeks—bakers, blanket- and shoemakers, traders; Jews—money lenders and traders; Ajaris [Mohammedan Georgians—*sic* in the original] are peasants, villagers, often [serve as] guards and policemen" (Moskvich 1913: 433).

17. Most fertile lands in Ajaria were in *waquf* tenure—i.e., were cultivated by tenants of the mosque charitable trusts.

18. In preparation for the "glasnost census" of 1989, some ethnographers in Moscow suggested restoring to the listing, among other ethnic identities obliterated since the census of 1926, Gurians, Mingrels, Svans, and other Kartvelian (Georgian) groups. Rebukes from the Tbilisi Communist as well as the dissident establishments were prompt, oddly unanimous, and quite vitriolic.

19. In Georgia's districts of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Gardabani, and Dmanisi, bordering on Azerbaijan, there is a considerable spillover Azerbaijani population (see Fuller 1984). These are the "true" Azeris, who speak Azeri Turkic and profess the Iranian Shi'a version of Islam. Meskheti Turks are Sunni Muslims and until their exile to Uzbekistan spoke Georgian dialects and the vernacular Osmanli Turkish.

20. Obviously a direct parallel to Serb nationalism and the Bosnian "Turks," but with a directly opposite outcome.

21. In fact, Abashidze rarely appears in crowded places. After three assassination attempts on him, he reputedly sleeps with a walkie-talkie and a gun, always surrounded by his bodyguards.

22. For the concepts of privatization and deprivatization of protest in Soviet society, see Motyl 1987.

23. In this respect participant observations and gracious conceptualization by the Armenian anthropologist Levon Abrahamian are truly outstanding (Abrahamian 1990).

24. Very significantly, the model of demonstration was unmistakably that of the Soviet ritual May Day rallies and Subotniks (Saturdays of voluntary Communist labor). Mobilization for such official occasions was always conducted by factories and enterprises—i.e., entrusted to and controlled by managers and official trade unions.

25. I would insist that Ajaria is a more wonderful example than it seems in the narrowly Caucasian context. In fact, Georgia has strong parallels to Yugoslavia. More prosperous secessionist Abkhazia would be Georgia's Croatia. Of course, Ajaria would then be a Caucasian Bosnia-Herzegovina. But very obviously it is not.

REFERENCES

Periodicals

MN – Moskovskie novosti

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