

CHAPTER SIX

GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN WAR AND THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTHS

In this Chapter, we will continue the examination of the role of language in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. We will describe the events that led to the violent phase of the conflict in the beginning of the 1990s as well as the continuation of the attempts at ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia during the period that followed the ceasefire. In addition, we will discuss the role of language in other South Caucasian cases, in particularly the Georgian-South Ossetian and Armenian-Azerbaijani ethnic conflicts.

6.1. THE BREAK-UP

According to the latest Soviet census, conducted in 1989, the population of Abkhazia was equal to 525,100 people (Amkuab and Illarionova 1992, 15). While there were 102,938 Abkhazians in the whole USSR, of this total 93,300 lived in Abkhazia proper¹ (Amkuab and Illarionova 1992, 15). Thus, in the beginning of the period of the Soviet demise, demographically, ethnic Abkhazians represented a significant minority in their own autonomous republic (see Table 6.1 and Figure 6.1). The number of people, who currently resides in the territory of Abkhazia is not clear, but according to the officially declared results of a recent census conducted by the Abkhazian authorities 14-20 January 2003, the number of people permanently living in the republic was 210,000 including some 40,000 ethnic Georgians living predominantly in the Gal region (*Abkhazia v tsifrah...* 2005)².

¹ An indeterminate number of Abkhazians, likely more than those residing on the territory of the former USSR, live in the Near East, predominantly Turkey, where many Abkhazians have succeeded in preserving their language. There are smaller Abkhazian diasporas who continue to speak Abkhaz in the other countries as well (interview with George Hewit, London, April 20, 2005)

² The censuses counted only those people, who permanently reside in Abkhazia during the period of more than one year (*Abkhazia v tsifrah...* 2005, 3)

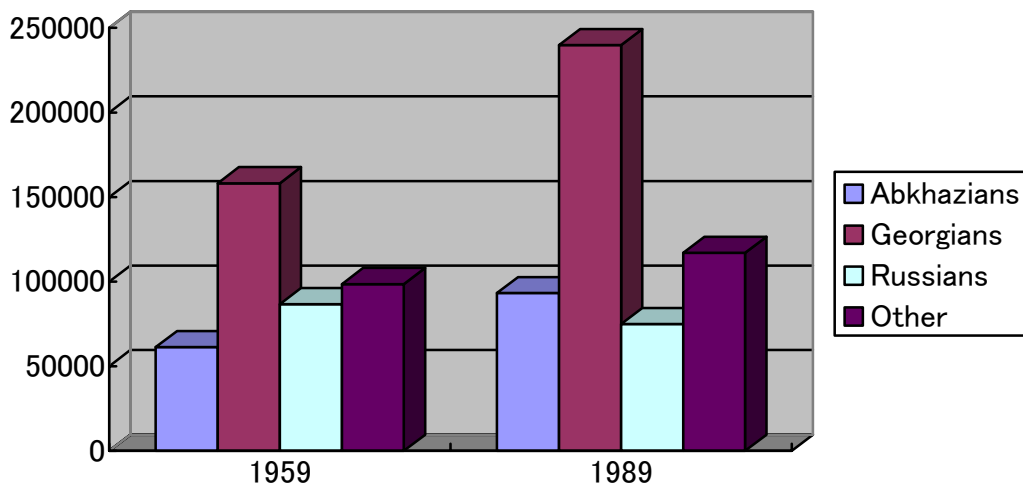
Table 6.1 Ethnic Composition of Abkhazia: 1959 – 1989

(source: adopted from Amkuab and Illarionova, 1992)

Ethnic group	1959	Per cent to total population	1970	Per cent to total population	1989	Per cent to total population
Abkhazians	61,200	15.1	77,300	15.9	93,300	17.8
Georgians	158,200	39.1	213,300	41.0	239,900	45.7
Russians	86,700	21.4	92,900	19.0	74,900	14.3
Other	98,600	24.4	103,500	24.1	117,000	22.2
Total	404,700	100	487,000	100	525,100	100

Figure 6.1. Changes of Ethnic Composition in Abkhazia 1959-1989

(source: adapted from Amkuab and Illarionova, 1992)



The change of ethnic composition in the autonomous republic, unfavorable for Abkhazians, became one of the topics discussed at a mass meeting, which took place in the village of Lykhny on 18 March 1989. The participants demanded the restoration of the Abkhazian 1921 status and adopted the “Lykhny declaration”. It is important to note that despite of the fact that the meeting was organized by *Aidgylara*³, which already had established its own network in autonomy, the party and Soviet leaders of the Abkhazian

³ The *Aidgylara* (‘Unity’ in English) People’s Forum of Abkhazia was founded in Sukhum on 13 December 1988 and soon became an influential political organization in Abkhazia. Many Abkhazian intellectuals were members of *Aidgylara*. The organization supported the elections of Vladislav Ardzinba, then the Director of the Abkhazian Gulia institute for language, literature and history, and the future first president of Abkhazia in the All-Union Soviet parliament. A famous Abkhazian writer A. Gogua was the head of *Aidgylara* at that time (Marykhuba 1990, 450)

autonomy also put their signatures under the document. Moreover, the Abkhazian authorities had been informed about the planned rally and supported it (Marykhuba 1994, 462; Kaufman 2001, 103). The core demand in the Lykhny declaration was to restore the 1921 status of Abkhazia, i.e. to upgrade it to the union republican level⁴. The full text of the Lykhny declaration was published in the Abkhazian republican newspapers *Apsny kapsh* (in Abkhaz) and *Sovetskaya Abkhazia* (in Russian). The declaration was signed by more than 30,000 Abkhazians not only during the meeting in Lykhny but also after the publication in mass media. The document was then handled to the central authorities in Moscow, including CC CPSU and Soviet of Ministries of the USSR (Marykhuba 1994, 463).

Meanwhile, the authorities in Tbilisi started to prepare the implementation of a new Georgian language program, and it was planned to establish a branch of Tbilisi State University in Sukhum. In July and August 1989, dozens of people died in armed clashes between Georgians and Abkhazians in Sukhum and Ochamchira over the planned establishment of the university's branch (Shnirelman 2001, 213). These events were indicative of the approaching of the violent stage of the Georgian-Abkhazian rivalry in Abkhazia⁵

In August 1989, by the decision of the Supreme Council of Georgia the Georgian language program⁶ became a law. While the Georgian language was the official language in the entire territory of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic at that time, in Abkhazia the Georgian language had equal status with Abkhaz and Russian and it was the Russian language that was predominantly used in Abkhazia (interview with George Hewitt, 20 April 2005). The law, however, declared that the Georgian language

⁴ *Sovetskaya Abkhazia* N 58, 24 March 1989

⁵ Traditionally, many Abkhazians as well as representatives of other ethnic groups in the Caucasus had in their possession guns, the fact which has been evaluated as a "cultural feature" of the mountain people (Galtung 1997; Kaufman, 2001, 90). In today's Abkhazia, amongst 120,000 adult population living in the area, 50,000 possess guns (*Moskovskii komsomolets*, April 16, 2003, see also "Workshop 'Light Weapons and Security Issues in the Caucasus': a Safeworld publication, 2002, in Russian)

⁶ The context of the Georgian Language Program was made public in December 1988. The primary objective of the Georgian Language Program was to significantly expand the practical domains of the use of the Georgian language in Georgia. The law also established a new national holiday in Georgia – the Day of the Georgian Language (Law 1998, 190).

should be used in all public domains everywhere in the Georgian SSR, including Abkhazia. In addition, the Georgian Language Law required the mandatory teaching of Georgian in *all* schools and the mandatory Georgian language and literature test for entering the higher education institutions everywhere in the union republic (Law 1998, 190)⁷.

At the same time, as it has been noted by many scholars, the period of Gorbachev's *glasnost* resulted in the tremendous growth of possibilities to publish many "ready-to-use" ideas everywhere in the Soviet Union. This was true for Abkhazia and Georgia as well. The stream of simplified versions of the results of complicated academic research on the topics of Abkhazian and Georgian history spread the pages of newspapers and the screens of TV. In Abkhazia, in the end of the 1980s, the local authorities were able to exercise almost the total control over the public media, and the local TV studio broadcasted several program in a week dedicated to Abkhazian history. In February 1989, the Abkhazian TV broadcasted a program entirely dedicated to Turchaninov's "discovery", and in the same month the newspaper *Abkhazskii Universitet* published a full text version of the TV program (Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 19). In the following month, Turchaninov took part in a conference in Sukhum. His account on the details of the researcher's participation in this presumably academic event is very interesting for our understanding of the way the Abkhazian population was exposed to the myth of ethnogenesis:

"During the time I arrived in Sukhum, the Maikop inscription was already well studied but my related publication was cancelled. Nevertheless, as soon as I arrived in Sukhum, I felt that people know my secret, even people who had never seen me before knew about my work. They were stopping me along my way and asking: "When you are going to present your report?" I was surprised: "What report?" "About ancient Abkhazian inscription". I was telling them, there is not any inscription. However, they were arguing with me, "Yes, there is an inscription". Thus, I understand, there is no way to deny. The date for the meeting at the Abkhazian institute of language, literature and history was decided. However, I asked the authorities to limit the list of attendants of the conference.

⁷ Explaining the language policies in modern Georgia, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that the Georgian parliament has been working on a new language law since 1997, a decision was made on 17 May 2002 to stop the debates on the final approval of the new bill for indefinite period. The deputies from the group "Georgia Prevails" demanded that no provisions must be made for the official use of any other languages in Georgia except Georgian (www.parliament.ge accessed 25 April 2006).

Yet, when I came to the meeting, I could not understand what is going on – people were coming and coming. Not scientists. Therefore, I decided to write the Maikop inscription on the whiteboard in the way it would be written in modern Abkhaz. I then asked the Abkhazians: “Do you understand?” They understood. Only after that I started my explanations. This is how everybody understood that it was really the Abkhaz language, though very ancient” (cited in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 18)

At the same time, not only Abkhazians but Georgians as well have rehabilitated old ethnogenetic myths, in which language was used as a core element providing links between distant past of Abkhazia and Georgian ethnic group: both sides of the coming warfare were able (and eager) to use the most extreme arguments. In 1989, the Georgian mass media had already fully rehabilitated the ideas of Pavle Ingoroqva, who argued that there is no distinct Abkhaz language (Chapter Five, p. 115). In addition, there are evidences that it was the authorities in Tbilisi, who arranged the anti-Abkhazian campaign that took place in Abkhazia in 1989 and involved an active propaganda of Ingoroqva’s ideas (Shnirelman 2001, 307-308). In this environment, the adoption of the Georgian Language Law in August 1989 was regarded by Abkhazians as a sign of the readiness of the Georgians to start the implementation of a new attempt at Georgianization of Abkhazia. While contemporary Georgian authors argue that the immediate motivation for the approach chosen by the Georgian leadership in 1989 was the desire to reach the Georgian independence and not the planning of a forced assimilation (see, for example, Nodia 1997 20), for Abkhazians, the ideas expressed by the authorities in Tbilisi during that time immediately evoked memory of two previous attempts at Georgianization, in 1918-1921 and in the end of the 1930s – first part of the 1950s.

The outbreak of ethnic violence in Abkhazia took place in parallel with the processes of disintegration of the Soviet Union. In both Georgia and Abkhazia the Communist nomenclature was rapidly losing its ability to control the political agenda (Marykhuba 1994, 450-460; Kaufman 2001, 103-104). At the same time, similar to the development of the nationalist movement in small European nations described by Hroch, it was the indigenous intellectuals who started to take over the control of the political agenda (Kaufman 2001, 105 and 116). In Sukhum, the representatives of the Abkhazian intellectual elite were among those who organized in August 1989 the “Congress of Highlanders of the Caucasus” (Lakoba 1998, 299). In the same month, an article was

published in one of the major Georgian periodicals, claiming that many Abkhazians are really ethnic Georgians who changed in the official documents their ethnic identity in order to get jobs reserved by a quota for ethnic Abkhazians (Kaufman 2001, 106). Later that year, the Georgian Supreme Soviet adopted a new election law, which made impossible Aidgylara's participation in the coming elections. In response, Abkhazians decided to boycott the all-Georgian elections (Kaufman 2001, 109).

In the October 1990 elections, the organization "Round Table/Free Georgia" headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia received the majority of votes. After the elections, Gamsakhurdia "had ... achieved such status as an icon of Georgian nationalism [and now] himself symbolized Georgian nationalism" (Kaufman, 2001, 109). Clearly enough, Gamsakhurdia made the following reference to the relations between Abkhazians and Georgians in the Soviet past: "In 1936-1954, the domination of the separatists and Apswa [i.e. Abkhazian] violence against other nations living in the Abkhazian ASSR was stopped. Yet, in the years after Stalin's death the separatists did their best to take revenge and restore the situation that [they had] obtained during the time of Lakoba [that is, in the 1920s]" (cited in Shnirelman 2001, 310). As a number of scholars have shown, the ideas propagated by Gamsakhurdia had wide support by the Georgian republican authorities and among Georgians living in Abkhazia proper (Shnirelman 2001, 310-311).

Gamsakhurdia, being a historical linguist, actively used Marr's ideas and popularized them in a popular book "The Spiritual Mission of Georgia" (1990). However, as noted by Law (1990, 172-174), whereas Marr had been anxious to enhance the status of the Japhetic languages in general and of Ibero-Caucasian languages in particular (i.e. not exclusively of the Georgian language), his more extreme followers amongst Georgian nationalists preferred to ignore that aspect of his work equating Japhetic with proto-Georgian. According to Gamsakhurdia, "the proto-Georgian or Japhetic root-language is a unique language-generating phenomenon, the common root of every language originating from it by a process of differentiation" (Law 1998, 179). Moreover, Gamsakhurdia combined the Japhetic hypothesis with some messianic hints to create a myth of salvation for the Georgian language, and hence for the Georgian

nation as well, whereas other languages were downgraded to the status of “Johnny-come-lately offshoot” of the Japhetic language (Law 1998, 179). The new government of Georgia began an active propaganda of the Gamsakhurdia’s views using mass media formerly under the control of the communist leadership (Kaufman 2001, 109). In addition, many Georgian intellectuals who were active in the pursuit of the ideas similar to that of Ingoroqva, had been appointed at the important posts in the government (Kaufman 2001, 109). In sum, the combination of the adoption of the Georgian Language Law in 1989 and active propagation of the same myth of the distant past as the one used by the Georgian ethnic leadership in 1930s-1940s to justify their advance in Abkhazia caused great alertness among Abkhazians.

During 1990, both sides still refrained from violence. That is why some scholars refer to this period in the Georgian-Abkhazian relations as the “war of laws” (Nodia 1997, 27; Kaufman 2001, 115). Keeping in mind the symbolic importance of the official language policy, it is not simply a coincidence that, when in August 1990 Tbilisi adopted a law declaring the Georgian language the only official language of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia, Abkhazian delegates to the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet declared Abkhazian sovereignty⁸ and the Abkhaz language was given the status of state language while both Abkhaz and Russian were declared the official languages in Abkhazia. The Georgian deputies boycotted the meeting (Kaufman 2001, 116). Following the decision of the Georgian Supreme Soviet to annul the Abkhazian “sovereignty”, the Abkhazian parliament became divided, and ethnic Georgian deputies started to hold their meetings separately from Abkhazian colleagues (Shnirelman 2003, 277). In December 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba, an Abkhazian historian, was elected the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet Chairman. In the following year, while the central Georgian authorities boycotted the all-Soviet referendum on a new union, the Abkhazian population took part in the voting and supported the idea to preserve the USSR (Marykhuba 1994, 467). Meanwhile, in April 1991 Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected the first president of the new independent Republic of Georgia. At the same time, there was no unanimity

⁸ This parade of “sovereignties” took place throughout all the Soviet Union at that time. In practical terms, “sovereignty” meant that local authorities declared the superiority of local laws over the all-Soviet legislation (or over the laws of a union republic, if that was the case, e.g. in Abkhazia).

amongst the Georgian political elite in the issue of the policy towards the autonomies in Georgia. That was, in part, because “Gamsakhurdia’s increasingly erratic behavior began to alienate large segments of the Georgian elite” (Kaufman 2003, 202). When the conservative part of the Soviet leadership attempted an unsuccessful coup d’état in August 1991, Gamsakhurdia was already losing power in Georgia. After the Soviet Union finally ceased to exist in December 1991, Tbilisi faced a severe fighting between supporters of Gamsakhurdia and the National Guard under the command of Tengiz Kitovani. In March 1992, Kitovani and three other leaders of the ruling council formed a new government and invited Shevardnadze, the former Georgian Communist leader and later the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, to become a new head of the Georgian State. Gamsakhurdia escaped to his native village in Mingrelia and was later killed there (Shnirelman 2003, 277).

The military council in Tbilisi reinstated the Georgian Constitution of 1921, in which no provision for Abkhazian autonomy was made. In May 1992, the Georgian Government demanded the dissolution of the Abkhazian parliament and new elections of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet. The acting Abkhazian Supreme Soviet proposed a draft treaty on federative or confederative relations to the Georgian State Council, but no reply was given by Tbilisi. In July 1992, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet reinstated the Abkhazian Constitution of 1925, according to which Abkhazia had equal status with Georgia (Shnirelman 2003, 277). On the other hand, as will become clear in the following part of this Chapter, both the Abkhazian and Georgian leaderships keenly felt the need to strengthen their ethnogenetic myths as one of the most important tasks at the moment when opposition between Abkhazians and Georgian was reaching the critical point.

6.2. THE CLASH OF GEORGIAN AND ABKHAZIAN MYTHS

The myths formation accelerated with the rise of tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians. The core components of the Georgian version of history of the distant past of Abkhazia at this time can be easily identified in the book written by Mariam Lordkipanidze and entitled “Abkhazia and Abkhazians” published in Russian, Georgian and English languages in Tbilisi in 1990 (Lortkipanidze 1990). Despite of the author’s

claim that 'the purpose of the essay is ... to shed light on the meaning of the terms «Abkhazian» and «Abkhazia» in the written sources of various languages and different times as well as their modern meaning' (Lortkipanidze 1990, 3), the main objective of the book is to support by historical arguments the political stand of the Georgian ethnic leadership.

Indicatively, the story about the search for the meaning of the terms “Abkhazian” and “Abkhazia” starts by defining the geographical location of Abkhazia: 'The modern Abkhazian ASSR lies in the north-western region of Georgia – in the historical and modern Western Georgia' (Lortkipanidze 1990, 61). In the subsequent paragraph, the author argues that, although 'there is no consensus in the scholarly literature regarding the oldest ethnic map of Western Georgia, in particular its Black Sea littoral (oldest here means 6th-5th millennia BC), from the 2nd millennium BC on, the picture is clear – the area of today's Abkhazia was inhabited by the Georgian (Kartvelian) population'. How this has been proved? The answer of the Georgian historian is that there are linguistic evidences of the “Kartvelian ethnic element” occupying the mountain as well as lowland parts of the Western Georgia in the 2nd and 1st millennia BC (Lortkipanidze 1990, 62). As an example, Lortkipanidze emphasized that the name 'Sukhumi' (Abkhazian capital) has Svan (Kartvelian) origin (Lortkipanidze 1990, 63). Another 'evidence': ancient Greek mythology describing the arrival of Argonauts to Colchis, shows the existence of the Kartvelian language by the time of the Argonauts' adventure while during the period under discussion the Kingdom of Colchis embraced the entire lowland of Western Georgia (2nd millennium BC) Facing a difficult task of explaining the mention of the presence of Apsilae and Abasgoi [Abkhazian ancestors] in the territory of Abkhazia in the 1st and 2nd century BC in the Greek written sources, Lortkipanidze argued that they are the same Kartvelian (Georgian) tribes as the neighboring tribes Egris (Laz), Svans and others while the modern Abkhazians are Apsua that immigrated from the North Caucasus in the 17th century. According to this Georgian version, there was a «gradual process» of the widening the concept of «Abkhazia», since the name «Apshileti» of Georgian medieval sources corresponds to the Apsilia of Greek sources. Therefore, at some period, the entire Western Georgia became known as Abkhazia (Lortkipanidze 1990, 64).

Another brick in the corpus of the Georgian version of the distant past of Abkhazia is Lortkipanidze's examination of the reign of the Prince Leon. The author writes, "[t]he ethnic affinity of the Leon is unknown, for there is no indication on this in the written sources. However, this is not crucial. Important is the fact that by its *language [and] writing* the Abkhazian Kingdom was a Georgian state, and their kings – judged by these characteristics – were **Georgians** [emphasis added]". Soon after that, the Georgian historian concludes that "The Kingdom of Abkhazia was a Georgian (Western Georgian state)" (Lortkipanidze 1990, 64). Following the discourse on the abolishment of the Greek Episcopal in Abkhazia, Lortkipanidze emphasized that "the Georgian Church opposed its Greek counterpart with the Georgian language and built its own churches and monasteries with services held in the Georgian language" and that "[hagiographic and hymnographic works were written in the Kingdom of Abkhazia ... in the Georgian language]" (Lortkipanidze 1990, 65)

Later on, Lortkipanidze's focus is again on the use of the Georgian language as the proof of the "Georgianness" of Abkhazia: "From the beginning of the 9th century – if not earlier – the Georgian language gradually acquired a dominant status in the Kingdom of the Abkhazians, becoming the language of culture, the Royal office, and the Church" and "As a rule, in Georgian written sources of the period under discussion 'Abkhazia' and 'Abkhazian' generally implied 'Sakartvelo' (Georgia) and 'Kartveli' (Georgian)" (Lortkipanidze 1990, 65). The language is used as a major evidence to prove the author's point of view once again when she discusses the ethnic identity of the population of Sukhum in the other part of the book. Lortkipanidze refers to the 1330's letter sent by Pietro Geraldini, the Catholic bishop of Sukhum, according to whom inhabitants of Sukhum during that time were "not some distinct Abkhazians (sic!) [and] they did not differ from Georgians in language, religion, and way of life, so that they were [regarded] Georgians by foreigners" (Lortkipanidze 1990, 69). Finally, turning to the period of the 15th – 16th centuries, Lortkipanidze mentioned a "complex... immigration process ... timed to the gravest situation obtaining in Georgia», which resulted in the settlement of Daghestanian tribes in Kakheti, of Ossetians in Inner Kartli, and of people of Circassian-Adyghe stock in the Western Georgia (Lortkipanidze 1990,

67).

The following part of the book reveals that the aim of the author is somewhat broader than a simple discussion of the use of the name Abkhazia and Abkhazians in the written sources, since Lordkipanidze focus is places on the description of the Ossetian settlement to the territory of modern South Ossetia in times “when the state is weakened, the process gets out of hand [and] a grave situation arises” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 67). The main idea of the author soon becomes clear. She writes, «[p]resumably, Georgians called them [Ossetians – sic!] 'Abkhazians'” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 67). Lordkipanidze refers to the testimony of the Italian Giovanni Giuliano da Lucca, who traveled to the Western Georgia in 1630 and noticed that the language of Abkhazians is very different from the languages of their neighboring peoples⁹. In this part, Lordkipanidze also emphasizes the aggressive nature of this people – “they were never molested by others, but they attacked and plundered one another” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 69).

Further in the book of Lordkipanidze, the perceived linguistic identification of inhabitants of Abkhazia is called upon in order to reject the possibility of building by modern Abkhazians a successful combination of the first-settlers principle with the dogma of the continuity of the use of the language ascribed to the modern Abkhazian ethnic group. In order to achieve this aim, the Georgian historian examines the hypothesis that the people who were called Abkhazians in the North-Western part of the Caucasian mountain range in the period after 17th century had their vernacular and this is the language used today by the Apsua [Abkhazians] as their spoken and written language. She writes that if to accept this hypothesis, than it is necessary to assume that “people speaking the Apsar language arrived and settled in Georgia later, bringing with them their unwritten language” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 71). Summing up her previous linguistic-historical assumptions, Lordkipanidze argues that “in the Kingdom of the Abkhazians the Georgian ethnos proper formed an overwhelming majority while the Abazgians¹⁰ and the Apshil (Abkhazians) – if considered as a non-Georgian ethnos – represented the [minority] of the population” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 72). And, according to the Georgian author, this is proved by the fact that before the mass migration in the

⁹ Ossetic language belongs to the Indo-European language family

¹⁰ One of the Abkhazian tribes.

Middle Ages, the “genuine” Abkhazians spoke the Georgian language!

After briefly touching upon the destructive policy of the Russian tsarist government in Georgia and the positive role of the Georgian democratic government (1918-1921) towards Abkhazia, the Lortkipanidze’s discourse continues to cover the period of the establishment of the Soviet power in the region. As in other similar publications, the word “enemy” is used in the description of the events surrounding the creation of the Abkhazian Soviet Republic. Those “enemies” (actually, highly respected political figures by Abkhazians) have been blamed for the complete ignorance of the interests of the Georgian population of Abkhazia (Lordkipanidze 1990, 73). The Georgian author rejects the right for Abkhazia to be separate from Georgia, which she considered to be “[historically] untenable claim”. Here, the proper Georgian rulers of that time – the Georgian Bolsheviks – have been also accused of compromising the Georgia’s unity. In Lortkipanidze’s interpretation, Georgian Bolsheviks ignored and violated the legitimate rights of the Georgian people, in particular of that part of the Georgian people, who for centuries lived on their own land, and would now have to live in the Abkhazian state” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 74).

The change of the ethnic composition of Abkhazia during the Soviet period is justified by Lordkipanidze as a “natural and legitimate situation because the territory of modern Abkhazian Autonomous Republic largely formed part of Georgian states, being the habitat of the Kartvelian ethnos from the earliest times. This, of course, does not rule out the possible assumption of the non-Georgian, i.e. North-Caucasian, origin of the Abazgians-Apshilae. However, the Abazgians-Apshilae ethnic group always constituted a minority” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 75). Then, once again, the Georgian author uses the combination of the first-settlers principles with the dogma of the continuous use of language in order to build a plausible for Georgians version of the Abkhazian past. Lordkipanidze argues that “in the significant part of the territory of historical Georgia, mainly in the Western part, although in the East as well, there is a presence of the Svan and Mingrelian toponyms, which leads to a presumption that these toponyms are not so much of Svan or Mingrelian linguistic origins but belongs to a common Kartvelian linguistic basis... but does not form part of the modern Georgian language. This, in

turns, confirms the existence of the Kartvelian (Georgian) ethnos in the whole territory of the historical Georgia” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 58-59¹¹).

Finally, the foremost conclusion is made by Marian Lordkipanidze in order to support the political stand of Georgians in Abkhazia: “today those [people] who call themselves Apsua... constitute a nation that has no other homeland [but] Georgia... 'Abkhazian' is a collective name, not possessing a single meaning.” (Lordkipanidze 1990, 76). We include such a lengthy examination of the book written by Lordkipanidze in this part of the Chapter because the book’s narrative reflected all major elements of the contemporary Georgian version of history of Abkhazia, which continue to constitute the foundation of the Georgian myth of ethnogenesis and which have been actively disseminated by Georgian mass media since the end of the 1980s.

Let us now turn attention to the examination of the Abkhazian version of the distant past, which was supported by the Abkhazian authorities at the time of disintegration with Georgia. When the Georgian control over the textbooks on Abkhazian history disappeared in the very end of the 1980s, Abkhazian historians intensified their work on the new version of the textbook and completed the task by the beginning of the 1990s. The 1 September 1992 was to become the day when schoolchildren of Abkhazian schools were to start learning the Abkhazian history using a new “emancipated” version of the textbook. However, almost the entire run of the textbook was destroyed in the flames of the subsequent Georgian-Abkhazian war, which started in the summer 1992 and described later in this Chapter (Lakoba et al 1993, 406-407). Yet, the textbook was quickly reprinted next year (in a Ukrainian printing house), when the combat was still on: five thousand copies of a school history textbook published during a war are a sure sign of how important this textbook was for the Abkhazian leadership.

The introductory chapter to the textbook entitled “The origins of the Abkhazian people” (Lakoba et al 1993, 5-12) was written by Vladislav Ardzinba, the Abkhazian leader at that time and a professional historian. The entire paragraph is built on the

¹¹ The quote is from the Russian version of the text since this part seems to be missing in the English version.

combining the postulate of the continuous use of language with the first-settlers principle. The author tells the students that there are only few sources, which can shed the light on the issue of the Abkhazian ethnogenesis but here '[the Abkhazian] language comes to a rescue' (Lakoba et al 1993, 5). The statement that 'as it is widely acknowledged, the Abkhazian language is one of the oldest languages in the world' (Lakoba et al 1993, 6) and is truly autochthonous to the geographical space occupied by Abkhazians today is supported by extensive explanations in the area of historical linguistics, including the examination of the Abkhazian topography and vocabulary. However, the key idea of the chapter can be easily found in the following sentence: '... in the modern Caucasus, there are two autochthonous families of languages: the North-Caucasian and the Kartvelian, *but [historically] they are not related to each other* [emphasis is mine – V.R.]' (Lakoba et al 1993, 7). This rejects any linguistically-based claim of Abkhazia being a Georgian territory. Moreover, as a general rule, each chapter of the new Abkhazian textbook devotes significant attention to the linking of the Abkhazian language to the historical past of the territory claimed by Abkhazians either when talking about the language spoken by the inhabitants of Abkhazia during the Iron Age (Lakoba et al 1993, 31) or explaining the origins of the words 'Georgia' and 'Kartvel', through the prism of a 'true ethno-political nomenclature' (Lakoba et al 1993, 90). When the textbook's narrative turns to the discussion of the Georgian-language church inscriptions found in the territory of Abkhazia, it is emphasized that the Georgian language was the language spoken by an 'internationalized Abkhazian elite' in addition to the Abkhazian language, and was not the language known to the majority of the 'common Abkhazian people' (Lakoba et al 1993, 101-105). Therefore, the authors of the Abkhazian textbook do not have a fear of putting as an illustration to this chapter a photograph of the bridge over the Baslati river, already familiar to us, which carries a Georgian-language description and which was used in the Georgian textbooks (Berdzenishvili 1973) as one of the major historical evidences of the Georgian rights on Abkhazia (Lakoba et al 1993, 103).

Another book that serves as an example of the Abkhazian version of history is called "Abkhazians – Who they are?" (Voronov 1993). It was written by Yuri Voronov, whose book was ritually burned during turmoil in Tbilisi in 1978 (see Chapter Five, p.

125). Voronov is building the Abkhazian ties to the area in question following the approach that “the linguists identify the existence of the Abkhazian-Adyghe proto-language by 3rd millennium B.C. The separation of the proto-language into the three major branches: Abkhaz, Ubykh, Adyghei began approximately 4 thousand years ago...” (Voronov 1993, 6). Subsequently, Voronov shows that the Abkhaz language as part of the North-Caucasian language family presents a relic of some ancient language family that existed thousands years ago in the territory of entire Caucasus. With respect to the issue of links between Abkhaz and the Kartvelian languages, Voronov emphasizes that “the hypothesis of closeness of the Abkhazian-Adyghei language [i.e. North-Caucasian] and the Kartvelian (Georgian) languages and of the common Ibero-Caucasian language¹² family is now considered to be erroneous.”

Closing our examination of Georgian and Abkhazian versions of the distant past of Abkhazia, which were supported by the authorities from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s, it is important to emphasize that despite of the opposing conclusions made by Georgian and Abkhazian historians, their narratives are based on mostly the same historical data, the only difference is the interpretation. Another common approach applied by the scholars is to use language in order to link the corresponding ethnic group to the area in question and justify the first-settlers status in Abkhazia. This is the most crucial element of Georgian and Abkhazian ethnogenetic myths, the basis of the entire construct and the reason why such an enormous political value was attached to language in the course of the conflict. Both Abkhazian and Georgian authorities maintained an extreme degree of historical awareness amongst the population and actively exploited mass media and school system for the propagation of the appropriate version of history, thus constantly strengthening the language-territories complexes and symbolically enclosing Abkhazia. As we will see in the next part of this Chapter, this made a noticeable impact on the behavior of combatants during the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian war.

6.3. THE WAR AND BEYOND: THE CLASH OF MYTHS CONTINUES

¹² See Chapter Four for the explanations concerning the notion of the Ibero-Caucasian family of languages

On 14 August 1992, the Georgian National Guard entered Abkhazia (under the pretext of fighting the supporters of Gamsakhurdia), stormed the parliament building and occupied Sukhum. It is obvious that the Georgian myth of ethnogenesis penetrated deeply the minds of the Georgian military. It can be partially proved by the fact that one of the first targets to destroy in Abkhazia were those related to the scholarly research on Abkhazian history. The archives of the Abkhazian Gulia Institute of Language, Literature and History were destroyed along with the National State Archives of Abkhazia. Many other sites associated with the Abkhaz language and history and thus perceived to be the symbols of Abkhazian “separateness” had been perished as well (interview with Vasiliy Avidzba, 4 August 2006). The violent phase of the conflict between Abkhazians and Georgians can be rightfully identified as an ethnic war, if the term is understood as “an organized armed combat between at least two belligerent sides, which involves ethnic markers as language or religion or the status of ethnic groups themselves and where at least one thousand people killed” (Kaufman 2001, 49)¹³. The Georgian troops also clashed with the Russian armed forces stationed in Abkhazia at that time, when Russian militaries were ordered to help to evacuate Russian vacationers from the Abkhazian resort. Some Russian civilians were also killed (Kaufman 2003, 203).

In September, the United Nations dispatched its first fact-finding mission to Abkhazia¹⁴. In the meantime, the Georgian advance was stopped: the Abkhazian political leadership was able to mobilize the assistance from the indigenous groups in the North Caucasus, Russian Cossack volunteers and members of the Abkhazian Diaspora (descendants of mohajirs) in Turkey (Fairbanks 1999, 26). There are evidences

¹³ According to the Georgian official data, approximately 4,000 people were killed as a result of the war and many more are missing (Web Site of the Georgian parliament at http://www.parliament.ge/GENERAL/HotPoints/ABKHAZIA/gen_E.html accessed 15 October 2005). According to the Commander-in-Chief of the CIS Peacekeeping Forces Sergey Chaban, the figure of direct casualties is ‘more than 7,000 people’ (interview to “Peacekeeper.ru” on 21 June 2006, <http://www.peacekeeper.ru/index.php?mid=1530>, accessed 3 July 2006). According to the data provided by the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the author of this publication during the field trip to Abkhazia in August 2005, the total number of victims of the Georgian-Abkhazian war is more than 20,000 people.

¹⁴The web site of the UN Observer Mission to Georgia (<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/index.html>, accessed 25 April 2006).

that the regular Russian army also took part in the fighting siding with Abkhazians¹⁵. In early October, Abkhazians recaptured the city of Gagra and the rest of the northwest Abkhazia. After an incident in December, in which the Georgian forces shot down a Russian helicopter evacuating Russian refugees, Russian planes bombarded Georgian positions (Kaufman 2003, 203). Georgia was pressured to sign a ceasefire and to pull back heavy weaponry from Abkhazia.

In the next year, 1993, the ceasefire was broken out. Both Abkhazia and Georgia appealed to the UN, OSCE and NATO to intervene. A new ceasefire was agreed by a trilateral agreement sponsored by Russia. In August 1993, a United Nations Military Observer Mission in Georgia was established to monitor the ceasefire¹⁶. However, on 16 September 1993, the Abkhazian forces launched a surprise attack on Sukhum and took control over the capital on 27 September 1993. The Georgian troops were pooled out of the region and the majority of ethnic Georgian population became refugees¹⁷. Later that year, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Georgia and Abkhazia in Geneva. However, in March 1994, while Shevardnadze visited the United States, the Georgian parliament disbanded the Abkhazian Supreme Council and the Abkhazian side suspended the negotiations till April, when Georgians and Abkhazians signed a formal ceasefire (“1994 Moscow agreement”) and consented to deploy the CIS peacekeeping forces (CISPKF). The problem of internally displaced population was continually discussed during the course of the year but with little progress. In 1997, economic sanctions were imposed on Abkhazia by the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States¹⁸. The restrictions on crossing the border between Abkhazia and Russia were also introduced.

In November 1994, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia approved a new Abkhazian Constitution. Abkhazia was declared a “sovereign democratic state, subject to international law” (The 1994 Constitution of Abkhazia, Article 1). The Article 6 of the Constitution declared that “the official language of the Republic of Abkhazia is

¹⁵ *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 14 August 2002

¹⁶ <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/index.html>, accessed 24 April 2006).

¹⁷ Approximately 200,000 people (Kaufman 2003, 204)

¹⁸ Evidently, the sanctions were the result of the Shevardnadze’s agreement to join the CIS and to accept the stationing of the Russian troops in Georgia (Kaufman 2003, 204).

Abkhaz. The Russian language as well as the Abkhaz language shall be recognized as the languages of the government, public and other institutions. The state shall guarantee all ethnic groups living in Abkhazia the right to use freely their own languages”. Note that no special provision was made for the Georgian language. In contrast, in the new 1995 Georgian constitution, adopted by the Georgian parliament, the status of Abkhazia was not defined. Although the new constitution contained some concessions towards Abkhazians, in particular, it granted both Georgian and Abkhaz language the official status, the latter had official status only in the territory of Abkhazia while Georgian was official language everywhere in the republic (the Georgian 1995 Constitution, Article 8).

During this period, the negotiations between Abkhazia and Georgia focused on the issue of the Abkhazian status as well as on the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. However, in 1996, new parliamentary elections took place in Abkhazia. The elections were immediately declared illegal by the Georgian government (Kaufman 2003, 203). At the same time, a special representative of the United Nations Secretary-General was appointed to monitor the situation in Abkhazia. A meeting between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba took place in Tbilisi but did not produce any significant results. Meanwhile, the Abkhazian parliament adopted the “Declaration on the Deportation of Abkhazians (Abaza) in the 19th century” (Gumba 2003, 57). The declaration served as the basis for the justification of a new position in the issue of refugees in Abkhazia. From now on, the Abkhazian authorities believed that the return of Georgian refugees can be tied to the issues of Abkhazian “refugees” in Turkey¹⁹. Immediately, the Georgian historians presented their answer to the new Abkhazian point: “Since 1864, Russian authorities had been constantly considering the option of settling the Russian Cossacks in Abkhazia [on the territory] up to the border on Inguri river, to form Cossacks regiments and finally, to annex this territory to Russia (to the present-day Kuban district). However, the Abkhaz (Georgian)²⁰ people opposed this provocation, which was one of the reasons for the rebellion in 1866” (J. Gamakharia, B. Gogia, *Abkhazia – Historical Part of Georgia*, Tbilisi, 1997, cited at www.abkhazia.ge).

¹⁹ This option to condition the return of the Georgian refugees to Abkhazia with the repatriation of ethnic Abkhazians from Turkey is discussed by some Abkhazian intellectuals (Gumba 2003, 34). This is also a stand, which is shared by some staff of the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (interview with M. Gvindzshia in Sukhum on 2 August 2006).

²⁰ Sic in original!

Thus, paradoxically, according to this version, it was not the Abkhazians, a distinct ethnic group, but Georgians who had to flee to Turkey!

In 1998, elections to local administrations took place in Abkhazia (again declared illegal by Georgia). Serious armed clashes between Abkhazian and Georgian forces occurred in the Gal region in May, the so-called “six-day war”, while another confidence-building meeting under the aegis of the United Nations in Athens brought no substantive progress. In December, the Tbilisi-based “Abkhazian government in exile”, which consisted of the Georgian deputies to the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, created the Party for Liberation of Abkhazia (their activities are discussed later on). The next move was made by Abkhazians, and in 1999, on the basis of the referendum on the issue of independence of Abkhazia, organized by the Abkhazian leadership, the independence of Abkhazia was proclaimed. Soon after, however, Abkhazia asked the Russian government to grant Abkhazia the status of “associated member” of the Russian Federation. The request was unsuccessful. During the following two years, periodical violent clashes continued between Abkhazian and Georgian forces. In October 2001, a UN helicopter was shut down during the monitor mission in the Kodori valley leading to a new round of hostilities escalation between Abkhazia and Georgia²¹. In 2002, the mandate of CISP KF expired and it was declared that the peacekeeping forces are leaving Abkhazia. However, later that year, the CISP KF mandate was extended once again.²²

New parliament elections were conducted in Abkhazia in November 2002²³. In the following spring of 2003, Abkhazia witnessed a serious political crisis, forcing the prime minister and most of the cabinet members of the Abkhazian government to resign. Apparently, the crisis was related to a new round of trilateral negotiations between Abkhazia, Georgia and Russia that took place earlier this year in Sochi. The details of this Russian-sponsored agreement had not been disclosed to the general public²⁴. At the

²¹ <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/index.html> (accessed 25 April 2006).

²² As in April 2006, the future of the CISP KF contingent is unclear. Currently, there are 2,500 peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 3 April 2006)

²³ <http://lenta.ru/vybory/2002/03/02/abkhazia> (accessed in April 2006).

²⁴ Internet news web-site *Lenta.ru* (<http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2003/01/28/passports/> and *Gazeta.ru* (<http://www.gazeta.ru/print/2003/03/07/putinverneta.shtml>), accessed in April 2006).

same time, it is very interesting to note that amongst those who organized the anti-governmental protests was the group of Abkhazian intellectuals from the organization Aidgylara, but this time the protests were directed at the Abkhazian political leadership²⁵. The following review of the paper published by one of the most prominent contemporary Abkhazian intellectuals shows the reasons for the dissatisfaction of the Abkhazian intellectual elite with the state of affairs in today's Abkhazia.

The paper is authored by the senior researcher of the Abkhazian Gulia Institute for Humanitarian Research, Guram Gumba, and is entitled "The Form and Core of the Nationalist Movement of the Abkhazian People". Many parts of this work were published during the period from November 2002 to January 2003 in various Abkhazian periodicals²⁶. It seems that the leitmotif of the Gumba's paper is the idea that "the intellectual elite of the Abkhazian nation has not realized yet the true essence and aim of the Abkhazian national movement" (Gumba 2003, 32). According to the author, the reason for the "backwardness" of Abkhazian intellectuals is "the intensive onset of Georgian intellectuals, who are superior in number and are constantly trying to reject the uniqueness and richness of Abkhazian ethnic and political history, culture, language, including the denial of the proper existence of the Abkhazian ethnic group, which is regarded as one of the Georgian ethnographic groups"(Gumba 2003, 33). The Abkhazian intellectual then continues with his contra-arguments: "The [Abkhazians] are the people with a two-thousand years' practice of a continuous statehood. They were active protagonists of the important historical events and made important contributions in the formation of ancient civilizations. These achievements are used today by many modern states. And the very same people experience the tragedy of doubt if they could exist as a separate state!" (Gumba 2003, 37). According to the author, one "tragedy" leads to another: "... it is sad to admit that part of the Abkhazian people, already free and possessing an independent state, are willing to live rather captive under the severe laws of Russia than to be free and independent" (Gumba 2003, 39)²⁷

²⁵ *Apsny*, 16 April 2003

²⁶ *Respublika Abkhazia*, 29 April 2003

²⁷ The last sentence from the passage quoted above refers to the initiative of the Abkhazian leadership to establish the "associative relations" with the Russian Federation

The end of the year 2003 was marked by dramatic political events in Georgia. During the so-called “rose revolution” in November 2003, Shevardnadze – a man who had ruled Georgia in total for more than 30 years – was forced to resign. The demonstrators led by Mikhail Saakashvili stormed the parliament building in Tbilisi. In January 2004, Saakashvili was elected the president. The new Georgian leader took a strong stand in the issue of ‘gathering all Georgian lands together’ and declared the return of Abkhazia, Adzharia and South Ossetia under the rule of Tbilisi as a main objective of his government²⁸. Later the same year, on 3 October 2004, new presidential elections were held in Abkhazia. These were the first elections, in which Ardzinba, who was the leader of Abkhazia for more than a decade, did not participate. However, Ardzinba strongly backed then-Prime Minister Raul Khadjimba, also evidently supported by Moscow.²⁹ Despite all this support, on 12 October Abkhazia's Supreme Court, following a series of contradictory decisions made by the Electoral Committee, declared that the next president of Abkhazia should be Sergei Bagapsh, Khadjimba's opponent. Yet, under the pressure of Ardzinba, this decision was cancelled by the Supreme Court later the same day. After the supporters of Raul Khadjimba seized the building of the Supreme Court and destroyed the protocols from local electoral constituencies, the new elections were in place. Both Moscow and Tbilisi were watching the development of events in Abkhazia very closely but it seems that the first

(<http://lenta.ru/vojna/2002/03/01/associated>). However, Sukhum failed to explain what exactly is understood by the “associative relations” with Russia. Meanwhile, the Georgian government launched a series of protests related to the issue of the Russian passports in Abkhazia (<http://rusnet.nl/news/2003/01/27/brief01.shtml>, accessed June 12, 2003). According to the Russian law until June 30, 2002, anyone who lived on the territory of the USSR before January 1, 1992, was entitled to receive Russian citizenship using a simplified procedure. Since Abkhazians do not have their own internationally recognized documents (the Abkhazian internal passport had been introduced only in the beginning of 2006), the only way to cross the border between Abkhazia and Russia is to use a Russian passport. In addition, Russian retired nationals living abroad are entitled to receive Russian pensions, which is an important source of income for senior Abkhazians. It is believed that the majority of the Abkhazian adult population possess the Russian passports (*Moskovskii Komsomolets*, June 12, 2002) although the exact numbers have not been disclosed by Moscow. According to the information published in *Literaturanaya Gazeta* (Vol. 28-29, July 10-16 2002) the order to make the procedure of receiving the Russian citizenship by Abkhazians as easy and fast as possible was given directly by the Russian president Putin.

²⁸ <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2004/12/16/minister/> (accessed 25 April 2006)

²⁹ Posters of Russia's President Vladimir Putin together with Khadjimba, who like Putin began his career at KGB, were everywhere in Sukhum.

was more successful in forcing opposing candidates to find a common ground³⁰, and in early December 2004, Bagapsh came to an agreement with Khadjimba under which they would run in new elections under a national unity ticket, with Bagapsh as presidential candidate and Khadjimba as vice-presidential candidate. The ticket won the elections with over 90 per cent of the vote, and the new administration took office on 12 February 2005³¹.

It is important to note that during the war and in the post-war period, Georgian intellectuals – supported by the authorities in Tbilisi – continued to cave such myths of the distant past that copy the ideas promoted by Georgian intellectuals in the 1930s-1940s and from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s. For example, in the book entitled “On the Traces of Abkhaz Separatism” published in Tbilisi in 1994, a Georgian historian, T. Mibchvani, argues that approximately 80 per cent of present-day Abkhazians are Georgians by their origin. Those Abkhazians of Georgian origin bear Georgian last names and have namesakes common only amongst Georgians. Therefore, “Abkhazians have no any other close relatives in the entire Caucasus but Georgians”.³²

For Georgian authorities, because of the tremendous symbolic power language has in the conflict in Abkhazia, any move to promote the Abkhaz language is considered to be one of the most serious crimes committed by the Abkhazian “separatists”. According to the resolution adopted by the Georgian parliament, anyone involved in the crimes against “major human rights and freedoms” in the region of Abkhazia is considered to be an outlaw. Notwithstanding the fact that the Georgian constitution declares Abkhaz the official language in Abkhazia, according to the official resolution of the Georgian parliament, the acts of “violation of the official status of the Georgian language” are among the “major human rights and freedom” violations and come abreast of terror, murder, taking hostages, kidnapping for money extortion, destruction

³⁰ From October to November 2004, high-ranking Russian officials visited Sukhum several times

³¹ http://www.vpk-news.ru/article.asp?pr_sign=archive.2005.69.articles.cis_01 (accessed 25 April 2006). In time of the author’s visit to Abkhazia in August 2005, the Abkhazian government was still undergoing a process of consultations and rotation; some of the positions in the power structures were still vacant as a result.

³² The web site of the Abkhazian government in exile at www.abkhazia.ge.

and misappropriation of state and refugees properties (the official English translation of Parliament of Georgia Resolution No. 1330-RS, 20 March 2002). It is appropriate to note here that the resolution was adopted in the parliament of Georgia, in which a number of parliamentarians is considered by Georgians to “legally represent the will of the people of Abkhazia”³³. In addition, the proper office of the “legal government of Abkhazia” (which mostly consists of the Georgian deputies to the Abkhazian parliament elected in 1991) is located in the Georgian parliament compound.

The image of “the government in exile” should not shadow the real power under its control. Immediately after the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993, the today’s “legitimate government of the Autonomous republic of Abkhazia” was called the “Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia in exile”. Since 1994, the “legitimate government of Abkhazia” employs 55 thousand people³⁴, and has a complex structure, including the Council of Ministers and ministries. It has its own Internal Ministry, which employs over 1,500 people as well as military forces under the direct control by the head of the Abkhazian government in exile, which until recently was headed by a major-general of the Georgian army³⁵. The “government” is financed by the state budget of Georgia, and the high-ranking members of this Georgian-supported structure repeatedly argue that “Abkhazia will be never independent! Nobody is going to allow that. Therefore, there is only one option left – to restore peace by force”³⁶.

The ‘Georgian Abkhazians’ are also very active in propagating the idea of Abkhazia being always a part of Georgia. The former head of the government Nadareishvili published a book about “genocide in Abkhazia”, in which the government in Sukhumi was accused of ignorance of historical evidences and falsification of the history of Abkhazian people (Shnirelman 2001, 311). The book fully supported the ideas

³³The official web site of the Georgian parliament <http://www.abkhazia-georgia.parliament.ge/> (accessed 20 April 2006)

³⁴ I.e., one third of all Georgian refugees from Abkhazia!

³⁵ During the period from 1991 to 2004, the Abkhazian government in exile was headed by Tamaz Nadareishvili (see his interview published at <http://www.abkhazeti.ru/pages/main/publik.html>, accessed 20 April 2006). In March 2006, Georgian President Saakashvili appointed Malkhaz Akishbaya the new head of the government in exile (<http://kavkaz.memo.ru/newstext/news/id/963449.html>)

³⁶ Interview with Tamaz Nadareishvili (published at <http://www.abkhazeti.ru/pages/main/publik.html>, accessed 20 April 2006)

of Ingoroqva. The author argued that the first settlers of Abkhazia were Georgians and the genuine language of Abkhazians is the Georgian language, which was disturbed by the mass migrations of the Adyghe-Circassian highlanders in the 17th century. At the same time, Abkhazia always remained an integral part of Georgia and there had never been any non-Georgian state there. Thus, the goal must be to revive Georgian genes and spirit (Shnirelman 2001, 312). Another example of the propaganda conducted by the 'Abkhazian government in exile' is a brochure entitled "Who Are Abkhazians?", which content is reproduced in the Internet³⁷. The words ascribed to Dmitriy Gulia, are used as an epigraph: "Abkhaz and Georgians are the same" to the part describing "The Horrors of Abkhaz Separatism". Without any reservation, the anonymous author starts his story by telling the visitors of the web-page that "Abkhazia is the same old and origin[al] part of Georgia such as Samegrelo, Guria, Adjara, Imereti, Svaneti, Kakheti, etc. Population of these geographical areas of Georgia is called Abkhaz, Mingrelians, Gurians, Adjarians, Imeretians, Svanetians, Kakhethinians, etc. However, all of them are Georgians and *their language was and still is the Georgian language as well* [emphasis added]". Why is that? According to the logic of the author of the pamphlet, it is because "all Christian cultural monuments of Abkhazia with Georgian epigraphy till 19th century are of Georgian origin". As was explained above, the overwhelming importance of the inscriptions found in churches and monasteries in the territory of Abkhazia for showing the "Georgian connection" has been built-up on the basis of the postulate of "the Georgian language continuously used in the area for a thousand years". Hence the conclusions: "They [Abkhazians] can survive in unified Georgia [only]" and "[Kin]-related Georgians and Abkhazian peoples do not need any mediator at all. They will find out mutual language [by] themselves, like namesakes and relatives, form their own government and ruling bodies".

In addition, a significant part of the pamphlet is dedicated to the discussion of the role of intelligentsia in defining the fate of Abkhazia. The author is impressed by the idea that "Abkhazians was so highly committed to the single state of Georgia and Georgian nation that it took [Russians] more than one century to [subordinate] one part of Abkhaz intelligentsia (higher strata of population)." In the subsequent part, however,

³⁷ <http://www.abkhazeti.ru/pages/main/history.html>, accessed 25 April 2006

the logic refuses to serve the writer: “The majority of subordinated Abkhaz intelligentsia was those foreigners turned to Abkhazian “nationality”, who were granted privileges in acquiring top positions in the highest government bodies... Abkhazia turned into arena of outrageous activities of strangers. Russian ideological services *physiologically* have [pressured] Abkhazian people for more than [a] century in order to create the Image of Enemy [out of] Georgians. For this purpose, they fabricated tens of written publications, radio and TV programs, declaring that Georgians had not lived in Abkhazia until the 20th century, trying thereby to mislead those unconcerned” The names of Voronov and Turchaninov are mentioned amongst the authors of the publications that ‘falsify the true history of Abkhazia’.

Concluding the “introductory” part, the author emphasized the importance of language issue. The object of attention is now Stanislav Lakoba, who, “encouraged by successes of anti-Georgian ideological war” and “devoted to Ardzinba’s policy argued that world community would speak Abkhaz language in the nearest future, while actually this language (Adigei-Apsua) is known by the minority of Abkhazian people”. According to the publication, the consequences of the Lakoba’s approach are dramatic: “All mentioned [above] stimulated certain euphoria among Abkhaz separatists, which, in its turn, gave them impetus to accomplish heavy crimes against humanity and mankind that are still remained unanswered”.

The continuation of claiming the first-settler status by Georgians in the large territory of the South Caucasus can be also clearly seen from the examination of the narratives of contemporary Georgian textbooks, which reflect the official version of history approved by the authorities. For instance, describing geography of Southern Georgia, the textbook entitled “Motherland” (for the use at 4th grades) explains students that ‘in the past, the territory of Georgia was much bigger than today, and the state border lied much further to the South. The enemies were constantly trying to tear away the southern part of Georgia and partially reached their objectives: some indigenous Georgian territory is now making part of Turkey’ (*Rodina* 1999, 83). The narrative in the 1998 edition of the textbook of Georgian history to be used in the 8th grade goes even further: it claims extensive areas of ‘genuine Georgian lands’, which nowadays

make part of Azerbaijan and Dagestan and some of which Georgia lost as far back in the past as 600 years ago! (*Istoriya gruzii uchebnik dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 8). In modern Georgian textbooks, the word ‘enemy’ is frequently used. E.g., ‘enemies’ are blamed for ‘sowing hostilities between Georgian and Abkhazian people in order to detach genuine Georgian land – Abkhazia – from Georgia (*Istoriya gruzii uchebnik dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 80-81). The task of explaining to 4-graders who those enemies are is left for teachers since the textbook’s narrative never provides an explicit answer to this question. However, the narratives of the textbooks for higher grades contain many references to the historic animosity of non-Georgian people toward Georgians (for example, when describing ‘the insidiousness of the North Caucasian mountain people,’ i.e. Ossetians: see *Istoriya gruzii uchebnik dlya 9 klassa* 1998, 19), in addition to the numerous references to the cruelty of Russians and Turks.

In modern Georgian history and geography school textbooks, language continues to be extensively employed in order to link Georgian ethnic group to the past of the disputed territories. For example, the authors of the Russian-language edition of the geography textbook to be used by 8th-graders equate the importance of studying geography to learning of the Georgian language and history (*Geografia gruzii* 1998, introduction). Therefore, in addition to the provision of the geographical names in the Georgian language throughout the textbook, authors put a map, which shows the spread of the languages in the Caucasus, even before political and physical maps of Georgia! Not surprisingly, the Abkhaz language is listed in the same group as the Georgian language (*Geografia gruzii* 1998, 5). The other textbook, starting with the argument of the linguistic similarities between the language of the Urartu people and the modern Georgian language (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 22-23), emphasizes the use of ‘Kartli (Georgian) language as lingua franca in the Western Georgia (i.e. the territory, which, in the Georgian interpretation, includes Abkhazia) as early as in 4-3 centuries BC (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 26). Thus, when later on, following numerous mentions of the importance to study the origins and history of the Georgian language for Georgians today, the textbook’s narrative turns to the description of the foundation of a new state formation in the northern-western part of the Caucasus in the end of the 7th century AD, students must not be surprised that, according to the authors of the textbook,

this was a ‘big Georgian state’ created under the name of the ‘Abkhazian Kingdom’ (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 77). In another chapter, dedicated to the description of the processes leading to the creation of a united Georgian nation, the authors argue that, in the beginning of the 9th century, it was the Georgian language, which prevailed in ‘every corner of the historic Georgia’ (i.e. including the territory of Abkhazia) and ‘started to spread in the Northern Caucasus, among Ossetians as well’ (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 99-101). The chapter is followed by an assignment to answer the question “What was the role of the Georgian language [in the process of the formation of the unified Georgian nation]?” (*Istoriya gruzii dlya 8 klassa* 1998, 106). Overall, upon finishing the reading of any Georgian history textbook, few readers are left without the impression that there is no other language, which has more historical links to the vast territory of the South Caucasus than the Georgian language.

The role of language for Abkhazians is continued to be highly appreciated by the Abkhazian authorities as well. To understand the place of the Abkhaz language in contemporary Abkhazia, the activities of the State Fund for the Abkhaz language are worth mentioning here. As we show in previous Chapter, only a very small part of the population of Abkhazia is fluent in Abkhaz³⁸. That is why one of the main objectives of the Foundation is to expand the knowledge of Abkhaz amongst Abkhazians. Various methods have been used: more hours are dedicated to teaching of Abkhaz at schools and the number of publications in the Abkhaz language had increased. A special budget is allocated to the translation of animated films for children to the Abkhaz language. At the same time, no official language policy in the form of a language law has been adopted in Abkhazia although a draft for the language law has been discussed for a number of years³⁹. The domains of the use of Abkhaz language remain very limited and it is likely that there are less speakers of Abkhaz nowadays than there were in 1993⁴⁰. However, as we showed in this Chapter, the Abkhazian leadership continues to exploit the Abkhaz

³⁸ There is no any reliable data showing the number of speakers of Abkhaz in Abkhazia today (Interview with G. Kvitsinia, the head of the State Fund for the Abkhaz language, Sukhum, 5 August 2006)

³⁹ Since 2005, the new Abkhazian government is trying to speed up the adoption of the language law. Following the initiative of the President Bagapsh, a special group within the government was created (Interview with Maxym Gvindzshia, 2 August 2005). However, the issue has not been resolved up to the date.

⁴⁰ *Respublika Abkhazia*, 29-30 April 2003

language as a key political resource in its opposition to the Georgian ethnic group by maintaining the role of Abkhaz in linking the Abkhazian ethnic group to the territory in question through the myth of Abkhazian ethnogenesis.

Summing up, from our examination of the developments that led to the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian war, the course of the war and the after-war period, it is clear that the attempts at mutual enclosure of Abkhazia were continuous and greatly contributed to the growth of ethnic hostilities between Georgians and Abkhazians. In the following part, we would like to take a brief look at the role of language in other South Caucasian cases, namely, in Georgian-South Ossetia and in Armenian-Azerbaijani ethnic rivalries.

6.4. THE POLICY OF ETHNIC ENCLOSURE IN SOUTH OSSETIA

A review of the place devoted to language in political discourses of ethnic leadership in other cases of ethnic rivalries in the Soviet Caucasus shows appealing similarities with the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. In South Ossetia, language was clearly exploited in a similar way to the Abkhazian case.

The principal point of disagreement between Georgians and Ossetians is the *historical right* of the Ossetians to political autonomy within the boundaries of the territory which is known today as South Ossetia. There is agreement amongst most historians that the Ossetian ethnic group was formed as a result of the mixing of nomadic Iranian-speaking Alans, who arrived from the Eurasian steeps, with the local highlanders from the central Caucasus (Shnirelman 2003, 462). The Alans' state suffered heavy losses from the Mongols, and they had to leave fertile lowlands and take refuge in the highland gorges. It was during further mass migrations caused by the Mongol invasions that some Alans began to cross the Great Caucasian Ridge and infiltrate the territory of the South Caucasus, including the territory of today's South Ossetia. However, in the 17th – 18th centuries AD a significant number of Ossetians started their “descent” from the hills to the fertile southern lowlands of Georgia, a step which was welcomed by local Georgian landlords, who needed labour. Therefore, the Georgian myth of the distant past categorically identifies Ossetians as the “newcomers”

in the area. Such a conclusion is confirmed, from the Georgian point of view by, for example, the evidence that many historical names in South Ossetia are based on the Georgian language (Lordkipanidze 1990, 66-67). That is why, while the Georgian ethnogenetic myth does not deny the links between Ossetians and Alans, it denies any “linguistically-proven” indications of the presence of the Ossetian ancestors in the territory of South Caucasus.

When this historical discourse became an official history in Georgia shortly before the Second World War, the script of the Ossetic language was changed to a Georgian-based one, and soon after all schools with Ossetic as the language of instruction in the territory of South Ossetia were closed down (Shnirelman 2003, 463). However, South Ossetian historians tried to show that the area in question presents clear evidence of a strong cultural-linguistic continuity of the Alan-Ossetian people – speakers of the Iranian language– during more than two thousand years. South Ossetians argue that Iranian-speaking ancestors dominated the process of the Ossetian ethnogenesis, and they push the Iranian tradition deep into the history of the Caucasus by demonstrating the uninterrupted millennial presence of Iranian-speakers in the Caucasus, especially in its central part. The close links between the Alans and another people of the ancient Caucasus – the Scythians – have also been established by Ossetian historians. Thus, the South Ossetian ethnogenetic myth presents Ossetians as the direct descendants of the Alans (i.e. the original Iranian-speakers) AND the Scythians. It also postulates that the people who lived in the area in question in the distant past as early as the 1st century AD probably spoke an Indo-European language, if not an Indo-Iranian language (*Ocherki istorii yougo-osetii* 1985, 58-59). This allows South Ossetians to justify their status as the first-settlers in the territory in question and significantly extend their ethnic boundaries. Summing up, the clash of Georgian and South Ossetian ethnogenetic myths can be rightfully regarded as attempts to ethnically enclose the territory of South Ossetia.

6.5. ETHNIC ENCLOSURE IN ARMENIAN AND AZERBAIJANI TEXTBOOKS

The names of Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan made headlines of the world newspapers in the second part of the 1980s. It was one of the first indications of the

coming serious ethnic turmoil in the Soviet Caucasus. However, a ‘peaceful co-existence’ of Armenian and Azerbaijani official ethnic histories was more than questionable during the most part of the Soviet history.

Here again, we can observe a case of symbolic ethnic enclosure by rival ethnic group, Armenian and Azerbaijani. We will start our comparison with the examination of the textbooks dedicated to the Armenian ethnic history. The teaching of the history of Armenian people was officially introduced in Armenian schools early in the 1930s and had been taught uninterruptedly on a regular basis to the high school students throughout the entire Soviet period (Shnirelman 2003, 73). Thereat, the Armenian history textbooks stand apart not only from the Azerbaijani textbooks but also from the textbooks published in other republics in that as the name of the course suggested, the textbook pretended to explain the historical development not of an ethno-territorial entity as in the case of other textbooks but of the entire ethnic group, the ‘Armenian people’. Of course, the plans of the unification of Soviet Armenia with the former Armenian territories outside the Soviet borders, which were in Moscow’s agenda during a certain period of the Stalin’s rule, had to do a lot with this fact, but we also have to remember that, contrary to the Azerbaijani historical school formed in the beginning of the 20th century, the origins of the Armenian historiographic tradition can be dated as early as 1st millennium AD⁴¹.

The early Soviet textbooks of the Armenian history followed the tradition of the pre-revolutionary Armenian historical school by showing the migration of the Armenian ancestors from the West to the East, their gradual colonization of the Armenian highland and their assimilation of indigenous tribes that happened to live here before Armenians (*Istoriya armenianskogo naroda* 1944, 30-31). However, with the strengthening of the positions of the Azerbaijani historiography and the growing importance of the first-settlers dogma for achieving a successful symbolic ethnic enclosure, on the one hand, and the growing tensions in Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh, on the other hand, the authors of the Armenian textbooks started to

⁴¹ After all, in the second part of the 1940s Stalin had similar plans with respect to Azerbaijan as well: he wanted to unify Soviet and Iranian parts of Azerbaijan. See L. Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946*, Cambridge and New York: University Press, 1992.

place a greater emphasis on the local Anatolian ancestors of the Armenians (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1950, 21). As a result, since the middle of the 1960s, the official version of the Armenian history was to view the Armenians as the only autochthonous inhabitants on the vast historical area of Asia Minor, and the only inheritors of the Urartu state (Shnirelman 2003, 74).

The 1972 edition of the textbook of Armenian history is a good example of a symbolic ethnic enclosure if the latter is understood in terms of expanding the ethnic homeland in time and space dimensions (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, the print run of the Russian-language edition is 8,000 copies). The textbook's narrative begins with the statement that originally Armenia occupied a vast territory from the Euphrates River in the East to the Mediterranean coastline in the West (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 3). The students then were required to identify the borders of the original Armenian territory on the map. In order to create a link between Urartu people and modern Armenians, it is argued that while the traces of the Urartu culture have been found in cultures of several modern ethnic groups, it is only Armenians who can be truly considered the direct descendents of Urartians because the Urartu culture flourished on the Armenian soil and because Urartians transmitted their skills and customs to Armenians. The evidences? The modern Armenian vocabulary contains many words from the language of Urartians! An illustration showing an Urartian cuneiform writing accompanies the discussion of the Armenian linguistic heritage (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 12-13).

In the chapter entitled 'The origins of the Armenian people', the authors acknowledge that there is no common view on the issue of the Armenian ethnogenesis and tales and myths cannot be treated as accurate sources of information. However, they then immediately suggest that all tribes, who lived in Great Armenia in the distant past, spoke various dialects of one and the same language – Armenian, and this is a clear evidence of the continues use of the Armenian language everywhere in this territory (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 16-17). The textbook refers to the observations made by the Greek geographer Strabon and provides students with an extract from Strabon's writings on the spread of the Armenian language in the area in question

(*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 34-35). According to the explanations provided by the textbook, when this territory was divided between Rome and Persia in 387 AD, the Armenian kingdom continued to play an important role, and the foundation of the Armenian writing system and literature was laid down as early as in 405-406 AD (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 47-48). The theme of the importance of the Armenian language for the fate of the Armenians continues through the narrative and the textbook devoted a half page for the photograph of the cover of the first Armenian printed book (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972, 130).

Explaining the relations between Armenians and other ethnic groups, the textbook points out the cooperation between Armenians and Georgians but tends to emphasize the superior role of Armenians in these unions (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1972; 54, 74, 93). This position is very different from the one expressed in earlier textbooks (*Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1944: 30-31; *Istoriya armyanskogo naroda* 1950, 19), when Armenian authors were willing to share the Urartu heritage with the Georgians and to acknowledge the presence of other historical groups, such as Albanians, extremely important for Azerbaijani historians⁴². Thus, after the 1960s, in the Armenian textbooks, a huge part of the South Caucasus became ethnically enclosed exclusively by the Armenians.

If the Armenian historians had to find a suitable solution for the first part of the “first-settlers + continuous use of language” equation, Azerbaijani scholars faced, perhaps, a more difficult task of solving the second part of the equation. The work under the first edition of the school textbook of Azerbaijani history started in 1935 but was interrupted in 1937 (the authors happened to be arrested, Shnirelman 2003, 135). However, the historians, newly appointed for this work, managed to finish the textbook draft fast, before the spring of 1939. As the enclosure technique was still in its testing stage by the Azerbaijani authors, they did not pay the necessary attention to the language issue but, instead, uncompromisingly called all ancient tribes in the territory of the modern Azerbaijan “Azerbaijanians”⁴³. The textbook’s narrative was tolerant with

⁴² Caucasian Albania was an ancient state founded in the late 4th – early 3rd century BC, which occupied the territories including those claimed in modern times by both Azerbaijan and Armenia

⁴³ While the proper name “Azerbaijan” was adapted by historians as late as in the 18th century

respect to the fact that those “Azerbaijanians” happened to speak the Armenian language before the Seljuk invasion⁴⁴ forced them to switch to a Turkic language (*Istoriya azerbajanskoi ssr* 1939). The case was different, though, with the next edition of the textbook, which was published just two years later. From now on, the Albanian alphabet⁴⁵ (introduced in the 5th century AD by the Armenian enlightener Mesrop Maštots) was declared Azeri, thus given to this ethnic group the missing element – a gift of a writing system, which could easily compete in terms of its antiquity with the Armenian and Georgian writing systems (*Istoriya azerbajana* 1941, 42). Later, the Azerbaijani historians made a few good attempts to get rid of the uncomfortable presence of an Armenian in the story with the Albanian alphabet. For example, the 1972 edition of the textbook of the ‘History of Azerbaijan’ is presented as a new step towards having a better textbook of the Azerbaijani history written based on the latest achievements of the modern Soviet science (*Istoriya Azerbajana* 1972, the print run of the Russian-language edition is 40.000). This textbook devotes to Mesrop Maštots a much more modest role of a “digester” of the previously existed Albanian alphabet (*Istoriya Azerbajana* 1972, 27). The photograph of an Albanian inscription occupies a central place of the textbook’s page devoted to the explanations of the Albanian writing system (*Istoriya Azerbajana* 1972, 26).

The 1972 edition of the Azerbaijani history textbook is a clear indication of how far the authors of the textbook have advanced in the task of combining the first-settler principle with the postulate of the continuous use of language in comparison with the 1939 edition of the textbook. *Exempli gratia*, the Azerbaijani historians could not avoid the discussion of the issue of the history of Nagorno-Karabakh for understandable reasons. While in the previous editions of the textbook, the ‘existence of strong cultural-economic ties’ was used as an explanation of the inclusion of the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh to the Soviet Azerbaijan, in the 1970s, the authors of the textbook have managed to show – using language as an evidence! – that Nagorno-Karabakh is originally an Azerbaijani land and Armenians are the late-comers

(Shnirelman 2003, 136)

⁴⁴ Seljuk Turks from Central Asia invaded the area in the 11th century.

⁴⁵ The Albanians are believed to spoke Udi, language which belongs to the North-Caucasian family of languages. The majority of modern Azerbaijanis speak Azeri, a Turkic language belonging to the Altaic family of languages.

to the area in question. According to the 1972 edition of the textbook, the area of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) the Armenian population used the territory as a shelter from the invading Arab Caliphate in the 8th century and their language was mixed with the language of the local autochthonous Albanian tribes, resulting in the emergence of the 'Karabakh dialect of the Armenian language' (*Istoriya Azerbajjana* 1972, 20). A few pages later but in connection with the previous description, Azerbaijani students learned that the population of Karabakh spoke the Albanian language and the tribes, who inhabited the area between the Kura and Aras rivers, spoke the Aran language, which was devoted the status of an intermediate joint between the languages of the Albanian tribes and the modern Azeri language, thus significantly expanding the territory under the Azerbaijani control in the distant past (*Istoriya Azerbajjana* 1972, 23). It is obvious that the mission to ethnically enclose the territory disputed with Armenians was eventually successfully carried out by the authors of the Azerbaijani history textbooks.