Conflict and Co-Existence: War, Displacement and the Changing Dynamics of Inter- and Intra-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia

Andrea Juliane Peinhopf

University College London (UCL)

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

I, Andrea Juliane Peinhopf, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. The fieldwork carried out for this thesis was approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Project ID Number: 8825/001).

Date: 29/08/2020

Abstract

This thesis traces the process of ethnic mixing and un-mixing in Abkhazia, a contested state in the South Caucasus that became *de facto* independent from Georgia after a war in the early 1990s. In particular, it focuses on the role of violence and its impact on people's relations and identities on the ground, a phenomenon which has received limited attention in the study of ethnic conflict in the former Soviet Union. It departs from the widely accepted view that violence and protracted conflict are largely a result of antagonistic identities, rather than its source, and instead shifts attention to the endogenous dynamics of violence.

Adopting an approach that is sensitive to identity as lived experience and drawing extensively on data obtained through ethnographic fieldwork, it argues that although there were tensions, a cross-ethnic, "inter-national" community nevertheless existed in Abkhazia. While society became increasingly polarised along ethnic lines from the late 1980s onwards, large-scale violence was ultimately provoked by the elite-level decision to send military troops into Abkhazia. However, once unleashed, atrocities triggered a process of antagonistic collective categorisation that paved the way for the mass displacement of the Georgian population.

But looking beyond the event of war, the thesis also illustrates the challenges that a community faces once war is over and the conflicting parties have become separated, a period, in which an external enemy continues to unite people – especially as the conflict remains unresolved – but, due to physical and temporal distance, has also become distant. The thesis thus argues that it is not just the experience of violence that shapes post-conflict relations, but also the experience of post-war changes. Although the language of ethnic difference remains powerful in Abkhazia, more than two decades on, people's concerns have shifted towards the new power dynamics within which their post-war lives have unfolded.

Impact Statement

As a work of critical interdisciplinary area studies, this thesis contributes to several strands of scholarships. Firstly, it contributes to the literature on ethnicity and national identity in the Soviet Union and beyond. It does so both methodologically – by adopting a bottom-up, agency centred approach – as well as conceptually – by focusing not only on nationalism, but also forms of "lived" internationalism. Secondly, by looking at how violence fostered a spread of ethnic antagonism, and thus taking into account the endogenous dynamics of violence, the thesis advances the scholarship on violent conflict in the former Soviet Union. Thirdly, the thesis adds to the literature on political violence more broadly by focusing on the long-term consequences of violent conflict. It demonstrates that although the war resulted in a climate of antagonistic nationalism, there were nevertheless people who continued to reject antagonistic collective categorisation as indecent and shameful. Moreover, the thesis also reveals that inter-ethnic relations in the post-war period have not only been informed by what happened before and during the war, but also *after*, and not only between the conflicting parties but also within the Abkhaz community itself. Examining the evolution of intra-ethnic divisions within Abkhazia, the thesis also advances our understanding of *de facto* state- and nation-building beyond the institutional sphere.

Outside of academia, this thesis is likely to be of benefit to governmental and non-governmental agencies in the spheres of conflict resolution and peace-building. It demonstrates that the intractability of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict cannot be reduced to Russia's role both during and after the war but is also rooted in memories of violence experienced at the hand of the Georgian military. Hence, any attempt at conflict resolution must not only take into account the involvement and interests of Russia but also the sensitivities and more intimate investment of people on the ground. But instead of re-claiming the Abkhaz side as the "true" victim in the conflict, the thesis also attests to the cycles of violence that turn victims into perpetrators and vice versa. As it is widely known, the war resulted in the mass displacement of the local Georgian population. As this thesis shows, this did not only impact those who were displaced, but also those who remained and struggled with feelings of shame. In practice, this finding might be helpful to reframe the controversial issues of property rights and the right of return of the displaced as concerns that are not only

in the interest of the Georgian government but also of those on the Abkhaz side. However, the thesis also reveals that people on the ground are not predominantly preoccupied with the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict as such, but with the everyday conflicts that have come to characterise post-war social relations. This suggests the potential value of a holistic approach to peace-building that moves beyond a conception of conflict as limited to inter-ethnic relations.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance of certain people and institutions. First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Richard Mole and Jan Kubik. Richard has been a steady source of support since my early days at UCL SSEES, when I first developed the ideas for this project, and it is partly thanks to him, I believe, that I was able to secure a full scholarship. I am grateful to Jan for being both intellectually challenging and emotionally supportive. It was his understanding and kindness that helped me navigate a complex field site. Both Richard and Jan have been incredibly encouraging at all stages of the project and, most importantly, never discouraged me from moving across disciplines.

My gratitude also goes to the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for providing the financial means for realising this project. I would like to thank SSEES for offering additional conference funding as well as for their generous financial support during the last few months of writing up. As an interdisciplinary area studies institution, SSEES has provided an inspiring environment for this project. Among my PhD colleagues I would like to thank Inesa Strupule, Stephen Hall and Rasa Kamarauskaite for their collegiality and friendship. I am also grateful to Peter Braga for picking me up at the airport when returning from fieldwork with too much luggage, and to Amanda DiGioia for interesting discussions about haunted houses in Abkhazia and elsewhere. Costanza Curro was an important source of support at the beginning of my fieldwork by sharing her intimate knowledge of the Caucasus.

There are many individuals outside of SSEES whose feedback shaped this research. In particular, I would like to thank Ruth Mandel, Ulrike Ziemer and Laurence Broers for pointing me in the right direction at the early stages of the project. Parts of this thesis have been presented at various conferences and institutions, including the 2018 ASN World Convention at Columbia University, the 2019 Tartu Conference on Russian and East European Studies, the 2019 ASEEES Annual Convention in San Francisco, the Works-in-Progress series at the Caucasus Research Resources Centre (CRRC) in Tbilisi, the Anthropology Research Seminar at Ilia State University, and the REES programme series at the University of Oxford and I am grateful for the insightful comments and conversations at these events. Parts of

Abbreviations

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
AO	Autonomous Oblast
ANS	*Abkhazskii Narodnyi Sovet* (Abkhazian People's Council)
FSU	Former Soviet Union
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
RSFSR	Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
TDFR	Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic
TSFSR	Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

List of Figures

Note on Place Names, Terminology and Transliteration

One of the challenges of writing about Abkhazia is the contested nature of names and designations. This begins with place names, which are disputed between the two conflicting parties. Where there are different names for a place, I decided to use the one that was common before the war started. Consequently, I say "Sukhumi" instead of "Sukhum", as it is currently used in Abkhazia or the Georgian version "Sokhumi". Exceptions are direct quotations where I have retained the original terms used by my interlocutors.

Any linguistic juxtaposition of Abkhazia and Georgia in this thesis is made for practical reasons and does not imply any judgment regarding the status of Abkhazia under international law. I also use the term "Georgia proper" to refer to the parts of Georgia that are both *de jure* and *de facto* under control of the Georgian government. While the Georgian government refers to those who fled Abkhazia as "internally displaced persons" (IDPs), thus highlighting Abkhazia's status as an integral part of Georgia, the common term in Abkhazia is "refugees", which implies the crossing of state borders. I use the term "displaced persons". Similarly, the Georgian government refers to the ceasefire line along the Inguri river as an "administrative boundary line" (ABL), whereas it is called a "state border" in Abkhazia. I refer to it simply as "border". Finally, I use "Abkhaz" (singular and plural) and "ethnic Abkhazian(s)" interchangeably when writing about people of Abkhaz ethnicity. The term "Abkhazians" is used for residents of Abkhazia, regardless of ethnicity, as well as for *de facto* authorities and institutions.

Because the research was conducted in Russian, I refer to original terms in Russian rather than Abkhaz (unless they are established terms in Abkhaz). Most Abkhaz are fluent in Russian, which is still the dominant language in public affairs in Abkhazia. Transliterations follow the modified Library of Congress system without diacritics, with the exception of certain well-known names and terms which have been anglicised in a different way.

Figure 1. Regional composition of Abkhazia. Based on UN map of Georgia, 2004.

Chapter 1.   Introduction

This thesis developed out of an interest in the connections that continue to exist across the state borders of the former Soviet Union and a dissatisfaction with the existing literature on non-Russian nationalities in the former Soviet Union and, to some extent, the scholarship on nationalism and ethnicity more generally. The literature on Soviet nationality policy tells us that the Soviet Union promoted national identities and, in doing so, significantly contributed to its own demise at the end of 1991. But while it has much to say about the policies that made this possible, it rarely features the lived experience of the people they were imposed on. How, then, I kept wondering, do we know that they became the national subjects they were "designed" to be?

To some extent, these questions were a consequence of my own experience "on the ground" during travels across the former Soviet periphery, including places like Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Armenia, where I regularly met people who seemed out of place in a system of post-Soviet nation-states. Unlike what one might imagine, these were not necessarily people belonging to an ethnic minority. Instead, they were often themselves "titular nationals" who, although supportive of their country's independence, partly also felt estranged from the dominant post-Soviet national cosmology. It was not that they did not identify with their nation, but rather that their sense of belonging and cultural repertoires were more complex.

This is how I became interested in the multiple forms of belonging that existed and have continued to exist across what was once the Soviet Union, including a "pan-Soviet identity" and its legacy today, which, I hoped, would allow not only for a more nuanced, agency-centred understanding of national identity in the Soviet period, but also provide a fresh perspective on Russia's continued influence, or "soft power", today. And it was also what brought me to the so-called unrecognised state of Abkhazia, which had become *de facto* independent from Georgia after a bloody war in 1993 that ended with the forced displacement of over 200,000 ethnic Georgians, and, after a decade of isolation, became increasingly reliant on Russia not only in terms of military security and financial aid but also the provision of Russian passports.

According to Mark Beissinger (2004, 224), "Abkhaz nationalism […] differed qualitatively from the separatism then growing elsewhere in the USSR [...]. Abkhaz

15

nationalists, for instance, specifically argued in favor of the preservation of the USSR and against the attempts of Georgian nationalists to undermine the Soviet state." Stretched along the Black Sea coast, Abkhazia had long been a popular and prestigious holiday destination not only for high-level communist officials, but also for many workers from all over the Soviet Union and beyond. Consequently, even though it was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) within Soviet Georgia, it was characterised by a high degree of diversity, both in terms of visitors and the local population. As Laurence Broers (2009, 107) has noted, in contrast to Central Asia's ethnically diverse capital cities, "the most cosmopolitan regions in Georgia were to be found in the peripheral autonomies, in Abkhazia and, to a lesser extent, South Ossetia."

Abkhazia thus seemed to be an interesting location for a bottom-up re-examination of "national consciousness" in the Soviet Union. However, when I arrived on the ground for long-term fieldwork, I soon realised that my interest in Soviet identity did not entirely resonate with my contacts. The problem was not that they were not eager to talk about Soviet times – many, in fact, loved to share their memories of "cosmopolitan" pre-war co-existence – but for them, the main event around which their lives had been organised was not the demise of the Soviet Union as such, but the war. As a result, I gradually began to shift my focus towards what everyone was talking about, although often in vague terms: the impact of war and violence.

The Georgian-Abkhaz war was one of the bloodiest wars in the former Soviet Union. It began on 14 August 1992, when (para-)military groups sent by the central government in Tbilisi entered Abkhazia, and ended thirteen months later with the forced expulsion of over 200,000 Georgians, most of whom have not been able to return. How did this become possible? Was this violence the culmination of long-standing cleavages? Or was it, to some extent, the outcome of previous violence? As an Abkhaz woman once told me, "[w]hat is interesting about our conflict is that we [Abkhaz and Georgians] were like *this* [crosses her left middle finger over the left index finger to signal close proximity and friendship]." While certainly not all of my interlocutors would have agreed with this statement – or at least only in certain moments – it did raise important questions. How did bloodshed on such a large scale and between people who had been living side by side peacefully for decades become possible?

Consequently, the aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between identity, in particular ethnic identity, and violence. To what extent are war and violence the outcome of antagonistic identities? And once violence erupts, what impact does it have on how people identify themselves and others? Shifting my attention to violence did not mean that I had to dismiss my previous ideas and interests entirely. Instead, it provided a new angle to explore inter-ethnic relations across three different stages: before the war, during the war and in the post-war context of "neither peace nor war". In fact, the more I focused on violence, the more I began to realise that although there has been considerable interest in the post-Soviet "frozen conflicts", few studies have taken a closer look at the violence out of which most of them emerged. One possible reason for this is that warfare has often been seen as essentially stirred and executed not by the actors on the ground, but by an outside power (Russia). As a consequence, the frozen conflict zones have often been reduced to "puppet states". This thesis, in contrast, seeks to uncover the intimate stories behind the violent conflict – why it broke out, what it did to people and how it continues to shape their relationships.

In the sections that follow, I will review the existing literature on ethnic conflict and violence in the former Soviet Union and beyond. There have been two main approaches to the link between identity and violence. The identity-based approach tends to regard conflict and violence as a consequence of pre-existing ethnic antagonism. Violence-based approaches, in contrast, have challenged this causality, stressing that ethnic antagonism is often the outcome of violence rather than its direct cause. As I will argue, both approaches are problematic in different ways: whereas identity-based approaches don't take the generative power of violence seriously enough, violence-based approaches tend to take it too seriously and often do not pay significant attention to individual agency and people's ability to resist violence. It is not only individual responses to violence that differ but attitudes towards violence can also change over time. Consequently, I argue that we need to look beyond the event of war: How do identities develop when the "event" of violence is over? Of course, in the case of Abkhazia, the long-term consequences of violence cannot be understood without taking into the account the intractable nature

of the conflict and Abkhazia's status as an unrecognised state.[1] How do identities develop in this condition of "neither peace, nor war"?

1.1. Violence as the culmination of ethnic antagonism: from ancient to modern hatred

The question of how neighbours turn into deadly enemies has received significant scholarly attention in recent decades. From a rationalist perspective, people are expected to choose peace over war, as the economic consequences of war and violence are usually disastrous. As Rui de Figueiredo and Barry Weingast (1999, 262) put it, "[t]he individuals and groups locked in these struggles forgo the enormous benefits of economic and social cooperation in favour of bitter violence and hardship. Why do citizens take actions leading to this negative-sum outcome?"

Some have looked for answers to this paradox in the realm of collective identity, i.e. our belonging to a group. Psychologists have argued that it is a natural function of the brain to categorise ourselves and others into collectives (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Hogg and Abrams 1998). According to Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams (1998, 64), "[c]ategorization is a fundamental and universal process [...] because it satisfies a basic human need for cognitive parsimony". It "imposes structure on the world and our experiences therein" and "brings the world into sharper focus and creates a perceptual environment in which things are more black and white, less fuzzy and ambiguous." However, while psychological theories have highlighted the cognitive foundations of group identification, they make no assumptions about the kind of group with which people identify.

In recent times, it has been the nation, or ethnic group, that has been singled out as the most meaningful source of collective identification. So-called primordialists conceive of ethnic and national groups as timeless and naturally occurring; they believe "that humanity is naturally divided into separate and distinct nationalities or nations" and that "[m]embers of a nation reach full freedom and fulfillment of their essence by developing their national identity and culture, and their identity with the nation is superior to all other forms of identity – class, gender,

---

[1] Following Caspersen (2012, 10), I use the term "unrecognised state" as including entities that are "only recognized by their patron state, and at the most a *few other states* of no great significance."

individual, familial, tribal, regional, imperial, dynastic, religious, racial, or state patriotic" (Suny 2014, 870). Applied to war and violent conflict, this thinking has manifested itself in the belief that current conflicts are eruptions of so-called "ancient hatreds" that have existed between certain groups throughout history. These antagonisms are seen as a direct consequence of the unchanging, essentialist nature of the identities of ethnic groups, making them prone to out-group hostility, and ultimately, if too close in proximity, inter-group violence. In short, according to primordialists, "ethnic violence results from antipathies and antagonisms that are enduring properties of ethnic groups" (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 849).

Primordialist assumptions, which date back to the 18th-century German Romantic philosophers Fichte and Herder, have long lost their credibility in academia and there is hardly a scholar who would apply this label voluntarily in relation to their work.[2] Instead, it has become common sense to look at nations – and ethnic groups – not as ancient entities that have a timeless existence in the world, but as fundamentally modern phenomena. Of particular significance in this context were the ground-breaking works of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. Gellner (1983) famously argued that nation-states were constructed by elites in order to facilitate industrialisation. While he recognised that elites draw on some pre-existing "stuff" in their construction of the nation, he did not regard any *specific* pre-existing material as necessary; as he put it, "[t]he cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any shred and patch would have served as well" (1983, 55). Anderson (1991, 6), on the other hand, has referred to the nation as an "imagined political community" – a community that is based on communicative practices that create an "imagined" bond between people who are, in fact, strangers. Both Gellner and Anderson regard nations as top-down constructions that rely on the homogenising power of educational and cultural institutions, and – in Anderson's case – the media, in particular.

Anderson's focus on language paved the way for post-modern and post-structuralist approaches that highlight the power of discourse in creating a sense of "we-ness". In his book *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Michael Billig turned to the production of a national common sense through symbolic practices. Whether it is a sports event or the weather forecast, "[i]n so many ways, the citizenry are daily

---

[2] The two names most commonly associated with primordialism are Pierre van den Berghe (1978) and Edward Shils (1957).

reminded of their national place in a world of nations" (1995, 8). Seemingly banal practices of "flagging", such as the flashing of an emblematic flag on the screen when a television newscaster mentions a foreign country, instil a deep-seated natural division of the world into "us" and "them", as they "continually remind us that we are 'us' and, in so doing, permit us to forget that we are being reminded" (1995, 175). Billig's emphasis on the power of language as something that does not simply describe but *constitutes* reality thus further dismantled the idea of groups as natural and timeless and highlights the constitutive role of discursive practices. As critical discourse theorists have argued, the "group" is not a real thing in the world, but an object of constant discursive re-creation and re-negotiation – and manipulation (Wodak et al. 2009, 9).

Despite certain differences, what both modern and post-modern approaches to nationhood and nationalism agree on is that the nation is fundamentally a social construct that in some way or another serves the interests of those in power. Against this background, scholars of political violence have moved away from the "ancient hatred" model and instead focused on how elites invoke a discourse of centuries-old nationhood to mobilise the public in favour of violent interventions. Stuart Kaufman (2001), for instance, has argued that ethnic conflict is the outcome not of ancient but "modern" hatreds – modern in the sense that they "are renewed in each generation by mythologies that are typically modern revisions of older stories with quite different messages" (2001, 11). Kaufman thus distances himself from the primordial conception of ethnic groups as timeless and naturally occurring entities; but he is also critical of so-called "elite manipulation" approaches, which regard ethnic conflict as almost entirely orchestrated from above (e.g. Brass 1991). Instead, he aligns himself with the tradition of ethnosymbolism, which views nations as modern constructs that have their origin in pre-modern ethnic communities (so-called "ethnies") which provide the basis for the myths, symbols, memories and key values that, according to ethnosymbolists, define modern nations (Smith 1986, 2009). From this perspective,

> [e]thnic symbols are tools used by manipulative elites, but they only work when there is some real or perceived conflict of interest at work and mythically based feelings of hostility that can be tapped using ethnic symbols. All three elements are needed to make mobilization happen: Without perceived conflicts of interest, people have no reason to mobilize. Without emotional commitment based on hostile feelings, they

lack sufficient impetus to do so. And without leadership, they typically lack the organization to act. (Kaufman 2001, 12)

What is essential for the outbreak of violence, he argues, is a combination of hostile myths, ethnic fears, and a window of opportunity to act on them: "Ethnic war occurs when the politics of ethnic symbolism goes to extremes, provoking hostile actions and leading to a security dilemma" (2001, 12). Ethnosymbolism thus stresses the relationship between elites and masses as a two-way street, and, in doing so, seeks to explore "the 'inner world' of the members of nations [...] by providing a cultural history of the nation and its members that would analyse the formation of the nation, pinpoint its distinctive cultural patterns, highlight its persistent and its changing symbolic elements, its conflicts and its reinterpretations, chart the creation of 'ethnohistory' [...] and of an 'ethnoscape' [...], and reveal members' sense of past 'golden ages' and their visions of a national 'destiny'" (Smith 2015, 2).

Like others, Kaufman has been heavily influenced by the work of Donald Horowitz, in particular his magnum opus *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985). According to Horowitz (1985, 98), "[i]t is true [...] that some ethnic antagonisms are of long duration. Memories of earlier, lapsed conflicts, centuries and sometimes millennia old, can be revived to fit contemporary conditions". But although "history can be a weapon, and tradition can fuel ethnic conflict, [...] a current conflict cannot generally be explained by simply calling it a revived form of an earlier conflict" (1985, 99). Horowitz argues that many ethnic groups are relatively new creations, but that even those with longer histories have often been significantly shaped by colonial rule (1985, 98). In his view, the source of conflict is the tendency of ethnic groups to compare themselves in terms of group worth and legitimacy. While worth refers to stereotypical skills and motivation of one group vis-à-vis another, "[l]egitimacy goes to one's rightful place in the country" (1985, 201), with prior occupation (i.e. indigenousness) being the most compelling foundation of legitimacy. Conflict is likely to erupt when a group views itself relatively low in terms of worth but high in terms of legitimacy, leading to a heightened sense of domination and widespread feelings of resentment. Colonial policies tend to contribute to this process by creating an environment conducive to group comparison, leading to a situation where "ethnic contrasts that might otherwise have been perceived only dimly were perceived all too clearly after the colonialists cleared the field for comparison" (1985, 149).

While Horowitz's work focuses mainly on Asia and Africa, the impact of colonial policies on inter-ethnic relations has also received significant attention in the context of the Former Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, many scholars have explored how the Soviet regime actively promoted the ethnic identities of its non-Russian population and, in doing so, planted the seeds of ethnic particularism, and, in some cases, antagonism. In line with the constructivist turn in the study of nationalism, these studies have been highly critical of the previous tendency to regard "current nationalisms as eruptions of long-repressed primordial national consciousness" (Suny 1993, 3) and instead focused on "what was at the time a controversial and original argument: that the Soviet regime had deliberately 'made' territorial nations" (Hirsch 2005, 3).

According to Terry Martin (2001), for instance, the Soviet Union was an "Affirmative Action Empire": "Russia's new revolutionary government", Martin (2001, 1) argues, "was the first of the old European multiethnic states to confront the rising tide of nationalism and respond by systematically promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and establishing for them many of the characteristic institutional forms of the nation-state". In the early stages of the Soviet Union, non-Russian nationalism was seen as a response to Tsarist oppression and thus a major threat to the establishment of a unified Soviet state. To mitigate anti-Russian sentiment, it was decided to support national consciousness but with the ultimate goal to overcome it. Both Lenin and Stalin believed that nationalism would first intensify but then wither: in 1916, Lenin declared that "mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion [*sliianie*] of nations only through a transitional period of the complete freedom of all oppressed nations." And Stalin later explained: "We are undertaking the maximum development of national culture, so that it will exhaust itself completely and thereby create the base for the organization of international socialist culture" (quoted in Martin 2001, 5).

The principle at the heart of early Soviet nationality policy was *korenizatsiia* (indigenisation). Its aim was to maximally support those forms of nationhood that did not threaten the unity of the central state, including national territories, languages, elites, and culture (2001, 9–10), and its implementation required "a constant practice of ethnic labeling" (2001, 449). But in order to do so, the Soviet regime first needed to acquire knowledge of the various peoples living in the territories of the former Russian Empire. This was to be done in the form of an all-

Union census in 1926, which, among other things, asked respondents for their nationality. According to Francine Hirsch (1997, 255), "[b]y 1927 some 172 nationalities had received official status, and the government had sufficient information about them to initiate the next phase of the state-building process."

Gradually, nationality became "a key element of an individual's legal status" (Brubaker 1996, 31) and when the Soviet internal passport was introduced in 1932, it included a line for nationality.[3] Initially, the registration of each person's nationality depended on his or her self-definition; however, in 1938, a decree was issued which stated that nationality had to be determined on the basis of the nationality of one's parents (Hirsch 2005, 275). This marked a clear turn towards a primordial understanding of nationhood, since "[t]here was no possibility of changing one's nationality, and no regard for individual choice, except for children of mixed-nationality marriages (and even their choice – made once and for all at the age of sixteen – was limited to the two parental nationalities)" (Brubaker 1996, 31). This, historian Grigor Suny (2014, 867) has argued, "rendered an inherently liquid identity into a solid commitment to a single ethnocultural group."

As historians have pointed out, the Soviet regime's attempt to construct nationhood in an increasingly primordial way thus had the unintended consequence that over time it was no longer believed to be constructed in the first place. Once these policies were in place, they became self-perpetuating and even though nationality policy in subsequent decades shifted towards a focus on the unity of the Soviet state, and affirmative action was largely replaced by a doctrine of the "Friendship of the Peoples", Soviet primordialism is said to have remained strong, not least because of the folkloristic celebration of "national cultures" that the new nationality policy entailed. Later attempts to promote the idea of a "Soviet people" are largely seen as a failure; according to Martin (2001, 461),"[t]he Soviet people were primarily a figure of speech, used most frequently as shorthand for the passionate patriotism and willingness of all the national distinct Soviet peoples to defend the Soviet Union from foreign aggression." Rather than a "Soviet nation-state", the Soviet Union became an assemblage of distinct national groups living side by side, or, in Yuri Slezkine's (1994, 415) words, "a large communal apartment in

---

[3] Earlier Soviet identification documents included a category on social origin, which, much like nationality, "served as an instrument of affirmative action" (Arel 2001, 4).

which 'national state units, various republics and autonomous provinces' represented 'separate rooms.'"

Viewed this way, the nationalist movements that emerged in the second half of the 1980s were not manifestations of "ancient hatreds" but a logical consequence of the Soviet Union's decade-long promotion of national consciousness. As Brubaker (1996, 41) noted, "[t]hat this paradigmatically massive state could disappear in so comparatively orderly a fashion [...] was possible chiefly because the successor units already existed as internal quasi-nation-states, with fixed territories, names, legislatures, administrative staffs, cultural and political elites, and – not least – the constitutionally enshrined right to secede from the Soviet Union". The problem, however, was that not all groups living in the Soviet Union were equal. One major distinction was that between "developed" and "developing" peoples. While Soviet nationality policy initially sought to promote more "backwards" people, from the late 1920s onwards there was a shift towards a policy of consolidation of smaller (and less developed) groups into neighbouring major nationalities (like, for example, the Georgians) (Hirsch 1997, 256–57).

This hierarchical organisation of nationalities was also reflected in their political-territorial status, as being lower in the hierarchy meant having fewer political rights, including the right to territorial self-government. At best – like in the case of Abkhazia – smaller nationalities could claim the status of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within an existing union republic; others were assigned the status of an "autonomous region" (AO) or no status at all. Consequently, while the dissolution of the SU transformed union republics into independent states over night, the situation was different for the various autonomous republics – including Abkhazia – and regions. While they had their own "national" institutions, in contrast to the union republics they were subordinated to, the legal right to secession that was enshrined in the Soviet constitution did not apply to them, leaving them "trapped" in republics consumed by their own strivings for national self-determination. Given this matryoshka-style ethno-federal structure, the outbreak of violence in some (albeit not all) of these autonomous entities, many of which pursued ambitions of "national self-determination" of their own, came as no surprise to many.

1.2.   Everyday ethnicity and the transformative power of violence

The approaches discussed in the previous sections demonstrate that there is nothing – or at least not much – "natural" about national consciousness and that group antagonism is more often than not the result of certain policies rather than innate differences or antipathies. However, while there is an abundance of studies on how elites construct – often antagonistic – identities, much less is known about ethnicity as "lived experience", i.e. how people on the ground engage with these policies and practices.

In fact, although the scholars discussed in the previous section are generally critical of primordial assumptions and stress the constructed nature of ethnic or national identity, their focus on "state-sponsored ethnicity" as a representation of "the sum total of ethnic meaning in all of social and political life" (Fujii 2009, 11) runs the risk of taking the existence of stable "ethnic groups" for granted. For instance, grand theories like Gellner's and Anderson's show how national identification is produced through certain institutions and practices, but they do so without paying much attention to the individual agents themselves, and in particular their *strength* of identification; instead, "it [the nation] appears to exist above and beyond the agency of any of us as individuals" (Thompson 2001, 20). But ethnosymbolists are not immune to this criticism either, for even though they claim to explore the "inner world" (Smith 2015, 2) of the members of an ethnic or national community by paying attention to myths, memory, value, traditions and symbols, they similarly tend to assume rather than reconstruct the power of nationalism on the ground.

This also applies to the literature on Soviet nationalities. Adopting a top-down, policy-centred approach, this scholarship tends to take the internalisation of Soviet nationality policy on the ground at face value. While much emphasis has been placed on how nationality became a key social and political resource in the Soviet system, thus defining an individual's relationship to state power, and contributed to an "ethnicisation" of politics more generally, the question of to what extent external categorisations reflected people's subjective experience of ethnicity, or how they responded to these categorisations, has received significantly less attention. Not only are references to how ordinary agents engaged with – and resisted – official policies sporadic and anecdotal, they also tend to be limited to the early stages of Soviet state-building when nationality policy was still in the making (e.g. Tishkov 1997, 20;

Hirsch 2005, 184). Once established, it is seen as powerful and pervasive, and a later shift towards assimilatory policies is usually dismissed as ineffective. Thus, accounts that start off as constructivist all too quickly fall into a primordial mode, for once created, national identity is conceived of as supreme, monolithic and unchangeable.

As Eric Hobsbawm (1992, 10) has argued, although nations are "constructed essentially from above", they "cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist." While he is aware that the view from below is difficult to uncover and that there is much that cannot be known for sure, three aspects, to Hobsbawm (1992, 11), are certain:

> First, official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what it is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens or supporters. Second, and more specifically, we cannot assume that for most people national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or even superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. In fact, it is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them. Thirdly, national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift over time, even in the course of quite short periods.

To counter the top-down tendency of the literature on nationalism and ethnicity, sociologists such as Rogers Brubaker and Jon Fox have developed an everyday approach that, instead of inferring the meanings ordinary people ascribe to and the uses they make of the nation or ethnic group from the intentions and meanings that elites impose on them, examines "the actual practices through which ordinary people engage and enact (and ignore and deflect) nationhood and nationalism in the varied contexts of their everyday lives" (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 537). This approach has important implications for both how to study group identities and the way we understand identities. Methodologically, it shifts the focus from the study of texts and utterances to contextually situated social interactions. Where discourse analysts would include interviews and focus groups to understand *how* individuals talk about the nation, analysts of the everyday are equally if not more interested in the *when*: "When called upon, ordinary people can call forth and articulate their more-or-less taken-for-granted assumptions about what the nation means to them. But *when* are they called upon? Just because people *can* talk about the nation doesn't mean that they *do*" (2008, 540).

Conceptually, the everyday approach replaces the traditional view of groups as "discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded and enduring" (Brubaker 2002, 167) with attention to group*ness*, i.e. "phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity" (2002, 168) and group-*making*. To study groupness as a variable, Brubaker proposes a distinction between ethnic *groups* as "a mutually interacting, mutually recognizing, mutually oriented, effectively communicating, bounded collectivity with a sense of solidarity, corporate identity and capacity for concerted action" and *categories*, which are "at best a potential basis for group-formation or 'groupness'" (2002, 169). Based on this distinction, "[w]e can ask how people – and organizations – do things with categories" (2002, 169), such as limiting access to scarce resources or activities, classifying oneself and others. Ethnicity, then, is no longer conceptualised as something that we "have", but something that we "do". Like Brubaker and his colleagues (2006, 208) observed during their fieldwork in Romania, "although we routinely speak of them as *being* Hungarian or Romanian, we might more aptly speak of them *becoming* Hungarian or Romanian, in the sense that 'Hungarian' or 'Romanian' becomes the relevant, operative description or 'identity' or self-understanding at that particular moment in that particular context."

Consequently, an everyday approach can advance our understanding of ethnicity by paying attention to when ethnicity matters, how it matters and when it does not (and why not). Yet, it does not necessarily treat the "everyday" as a sphere of unconstrained individual agency. Rather, it aims to uncover "the different options that actors may pursue to react to existing boundaries, to overcome and to reinforce them, to shift them to exclude new groups of individuals or include others, or to promote other, nonethnic modes of classification and social practice" (Wimmer 2013, 46). The notion of the "social situation" is particularly helpful to conceptualise agency in this context. Instead of a narrow focus on "the macroscopic political, administrative, and economic structures", social situations reveal the "different courses of action actors may then pursue according to their understanding of their personal circumstances within this framework" (Okamura 1981, 453). The everyday perspective is therefore closely linked to the situational approach to ethnicity within anthropology, which, drawing on Max Gluckman's (1940, 29) notion of situational selection, sees ethnic salience in a given situation as dependent on the different values, interests and motives of individuals, allowing them to assert "either their

primary ethnic identity or other social identities, such as those derivative of class or occupation" (Okamura 1981, 460).

But what are the kinds of "situations" in which ethnicity can become salient? According to Brubaker (2002), violence – whether from above or below – is one of the most effective strategies of turning categories into groups. Writing about how the attacks by the Kosovo Liberation Army on Serb policemen provoked massive regime reprisals that ultimately led to a vicious cycle of attacks and counterattacks and thus significantly increased groupness on both sides, he concludes that "[i]n this sense, group crystallization and polarization were the result of violence, not the cause" (2002, 171). For even though groupness was relatively high before the attacks were carried out, "there remains considerable scope for deliberate group-making strategies. Certain dramatic events, in particular, can serve to galvanise and crystallise a potential group, or to ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness. This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group-making" (2002, 171).

Over the past decades, an increasing number of works both in anthropology (e.g. Feldman 1991; Appadurai 1998) and civil war studies (e.g. Kalyvas 2008; Wood 2008; Sambanis and Shayo 2013) have indeed shown that highly antagonistic identities are often the result of violence and not the other way around. These studies have criticised identity-based approaches for paying little attention to violence in its own right, i.e. why it happens in a particular place and how it then impacts the communities (and identities) where it occurs. One of their key findings is that violence itself does not have to be "ethnically" motivated; however, once it unfolds, it can have powerful "ethnicising" consequences. For example, in his in-depth study of the dynamics of violence in Kulen Vakuf, a small town in rural north-West Bosnia, where a massacre took place in 1941 in which 2,000 people were killed, historian Max Bergholz (2016) shows that deep-seated ethnic cleavages on the ground are not a necessary precondition for mass atrocities to erupt. Rather, it is often situational factors – such as greed – that motivate micro-level actors to pursue violence on an ethnic axis. However, once violence is employed, it can deeply affect how people see themselves and those around them. According to Bergholz (2016, 111),

> [t]he sudden violence had a deeply polarizing effect on intercommunal relations, leading to a rapid transformation of neighbors into collective categories of enemies, and calls for retaliation along such lines. The nature of the violence—in which people were killed because they were perceived as part of an ethnic category—altered how many survivors saw themselves and those whom they viewed as now being in conflict with. The experience of violence triggered a rapidly crystallizing sense of the local community as now divided into ethnically defined, antagonistic collectivities.

What is remarkable about Bergholz's work is not only that he, like others before him, demonstrates how situational violence has the power to produce highly antagonistic ethnic identities, but that he also uncovers instances of inter-ethnic rescue where intercommunal friendship was not suspended by violence but instead grew even deeper, suggesting that "contexts of extreme inter-ethnic violence, which often produce the antagonistic collective categorization that may further intensify violence, can simultaneously strengthen inter-ethnic social ties, or create new ones" (2016, 137). To account for these variations, political scientist Lee Ann Fujii (2009, 12) has referred to state-sponsored ethnicity as a "script" for violence, i.e. a "dramaturgical blueprint" that is typically created by threatened elites in the centre and then diffused through various channels – such as the mass media, meetings and rallies – to local elites, which then create their own local version of the "production" that fits local needs and allows them to consolidate their power. The realisation of the script, however, depends on the actors, whose skills, motivations, interests and level of commitment can be expected to be of different degrees. This, to Fujii (2009, 13), means that

> [t]he result of this creative process is not a single performance or outcome, but a welter of diverse performances. Some actors will follow the text closely, such as when killers go after Tutsi and only Tutsi. Some will stray from the text as when killers target Hutu as well as Tutsi for killing. Some may abandon the script altogether as when killers help Tutsi instead of hurt them. The advantage of conceptualizing state-sponsored ethnicity this way is that it leads us to disaggregate the violence and to investigate the complexities and ambiguities embedded within the genocide.

According to Fujii (2009, 13–14), "[t]his alternative lens shifts the focus away from ethnicity as an external force to those who interpret, direct, and perform the script. It shifts attention to the directors and actors, and by doing so, provides the possibility for agency at every level, not only on the part of leaders, but also among

their supposed followers." What this demonstrates is that while it is indeed important to take the force of violence seriously, one should also be careful not to take it for granted, for even if violence is successful at generating high levels of groupness, it does not suspend individual agency and alternative forms of solidarity altogether.

1.3. Beyond nationhood as event: identity in "frozen conflict"

But there is another important question that has not received much attention: How does groupness develop when war is over? Just like it is necessary to ask what there was before violence broke out, it is necessary to ask what happens after. However, while many studies have focused on how war and violence produce high levels of groupness, fewer studies have adopted a longer-term perspective and investigated changing levels of groupness beyond the immediate experience of war and violence. The implicit assumption seems to be that, once identities are "hard", it becomes almost impossible to soften them. However, that experiences of violence produce highly cohesive "ethnic groups" does not imply that those "groups", once formed, are then unchangeable – believing so would be just another case of "groupism". As Brubaker (2002, 177) has noted, "[o]nce ratcheted up to a high level, groupness does not remain there out of inertia. If not sustained at high levels through specific social and cognitive mechanisms, it will tend to decline, as everyday interests reassert themselves, through a process of what Weber (in a different but apposite context [1968 (1922): 246-254] called 'routinization' (*Veralltaeglichung*, literally 'towards everydayness')."

Some answers can be found in the literature on reconciliation and post-war reconstruction, in particular in the former Yugoslavia. This scholarship largely supports the assumption that identities remain "hard": For example, in Bosnia, where the war ended in 1996 with the Dayton agreement, which stipulated not only the right of internationally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to return to their place of origin but also to have their property restored (e.g. Stefansson 2006), many chose not to return, and those who did faced significant challenges. As political geographers Gerard Toal and Carl Dahlman (2011, 174) observed, returning not only meant "confronting a landscape of trauma and fear where one's persecutors were most likely still in charge" but also unemployment and economic hardship. In their

assessment, "violence and war had not only ethnically divided Bosnian space but also broken its infrastructural coherence, legitimated its material division, obstructed movement, and implanted fear and dread in the minds of the displaced. Bosnia-Herzegovina's partition ran deep" (2011, 174).

Adopting a more localised lens, anthropologist Anders Stefansson (2006) has described the estrangement and isolation that many Muslim Bosnian repatriates experienced in the once multi-ethnic town of Banja Luka that was now Serbian-dominated. Although the international community saw repatriation as essential to post-war reconstruction, in reality, people who returned not only felt culturally estranged but were often fearful to leave their houses. The house thus "functioned as a sort of 'prison' because the returnees perceived the society beyond the protective walls of the house or the local neighbourhood as a 'Serb' and non-homely place" (2006, 125). According to Stefansson (2006, 132), "[w]ar and mass displacement bring profound changes to society, and it is illusory to believe that all those transformations can be, and perhaps should be, reversed after the signing of peace agreements."

Yet, amidst widespread segregation and isolation, scholars also noted cases of inter-ethnic engagement. For example, Stefansson (2010) observed instances of renewed inter-ethnic contact between the Bosniak (Muslim) returnees and displaced Serbs who moved to Banja Luka from their homes in other areas and thus shared the experience of displacement. Although these encounters were based on economic interest, initial economic transactions were often followed by coffee visits. Inter-ethnic cooperation was thus not only driven by material gains, but, as Stefansson (2010, 68) suggests, "also provided a first and seemingly quite 'neutral' stage for social interaction between members of different ethnic groups on which a measure of respect, civility, and tolerance for the Other had to be publicly displayed". In a similar vein, anthropologist Stef Jansen (2015, 11) has criticised the dominant "unidimensional emphasis on questions of (ethno)national 'culture'". He argues that people in Bosnia have been much more concerned with re-establishing "normal lives" than with issues of identity. When Bosnians engaged in inter-ethnic encounters after the war, this was not usually perceived "as moral acts in a reconciliation process", like abstract, foreign-imposed notions of reconciliation would suggest, but as a process of securing a sense of normality:

> If men now associated with opposing national "sides" met, they did not define this as an example of a crossing of national boundaries in a mosaic that was good in and by itself. Nor did they remember previous international interactions as such. Instead such meetings had been just one part of "normal life," and it was that "normal life" which featured as their main object of desire. Insofar as crossing national boundaries might further the continuation or, more frequently, the re-establishment of some dimensions of "normal life" for themselves and their households, some were prepared to engage in them. (2010, 45)

Like Stefansson, Jansen stresses the importance of avoiding controversial issues through "selective silence" in order to make these "normal" encounters possible. Although this might cast doubt on the prospect of ever reaching reconciliation in a "thick", idealist sense that foregrounds the restoration of relationships through dialogue, empathy and forgiveness (e.g. Lederach 1997; Amstutz 2005), these studies nevertheless demonstrate the ability – and to some extent even the willingness or desire – of post-war actors to engage with those associated with the enemy on the basis of non-ethnic bonds of neighbourhood or gender, among others. Hence, without denying the reality and strength of ethnic cleavages in the wake of war, they also highlight the multiplicity of social entanglements on the ground.

However, while post-war co-existence (or the lack thereof) in the aftermath of atrocities is relatively well documented in the former Yugoslavia, similar bottom-up studies in the context of the post-Soviet wars are rare.[4] Of course, a major difference between the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the FSU is that the majority of the latter, including Abkhazia, have remained unresolved. They are so-called "frozen conflicts", i.e. conflicts where active fighting has ceased but because no peace treaty has been reached hostilities can resume at any time (de Haas 2010, n. 181). Due to the efforts and relative success to build states that lack international recognition but have a high degree of internal legitimacy (e.g. Bakke et al. 2012; Caspersen 2012, chap. 4), these conflicts have become increasingly intractable.

Social psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal (2013, 353) has described intractable conflicts as "being protracted, irreconcilable, violent, of a zero-sum nature, total, and central, with the parties involved having an interest in their continuation". This condition appears to be naturally conducive to sustaining high levels of "groupness" over a prolonged period. In order to adapt to the conflict situation, societies in

---

[4] Exceptions include Garb (1995, 2009), Garb and Whiteley (2001), Zemskov-Züge (2015, 2016).

intractable conflict develop an extensive and pervasive "socio-psychological infrastructure" (Bar-Tal 2013). Maintaining a certain sense of "woundedness", collective memory is a key component of this infrastructure. Society members can only cope with the hardships and sacrifices involved in intractable conflict if they believe that the conflict is legitimate. Collective memory thus provides an important foundation: "It depicts the reasons for the conflict's eruption, describes the events that took place, and explains why it did not end. This is done always in a selective, biased, distortive, and simplistic way with the goal of putting all the blame on the rival and portraying the other side with the most negative characteristics, which stand in clear contrast to the glorification and moralization of the ingroup" (2013, 172).

The constant public dissemination of the collective memory of the conflict also has an important emotional dimension, as it sustains feelings of anger, fear, sadness and even hatred. Over time, these negative emotions develop into a certain chronic collective emotional orientation that is widely shared among society members. Psychologist Eran Halperin (2016) has identified anger and fear as the most common emotional reactions in intractable conflict. While anger motivates people towards – often aggressive – action and is therefore crucial for mass mobilisation, fear "takes over people's daily lives, their thoughts, dreams, concerns, and even their interpersonal relations" (2016, 67). Fear is experienced both individually and collectively: On a personal level, those concerned often fear for the lives and well-beings of themselves and their close ones. On a collective level, they are regularly exposed to the threatening rhetoric of the adversary, nourishing "collective angst" (Wohl and Branscombe 2009) about the very existence of the group.

The memory of past violence is hence also reinforced by the persistence of an external threat. Even though, in the case of "frozen conflicts", active warfare has ceased, as unrecognised entities, the post-Soviet *de facto* states lack the protection from external invasion associated with international recognition, making "the resumption of war [...] a very real possibility" (Caspersen 2012, 70). The widespread lack of recognition also contributes to heightened perceptions of threat by fostering a so-called siege mentality, i.e. the belief that the whole world is against the group (Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992a, 1992b). Anthropologist Rebecca Bryant (2014b, 128) has compared *de facto* states to enclaves or ghettos "produced by economic

embargos and political isolation that, for those who experience them, often resemble the conditions of a siege" and thus "lead to forms of intense solidarity". Like other isolated entities, she (2014b, 128) argues, they "are built on conditions of insecurity and a persistent threat or belief in a threat from the outside world."

As a consequence of this situation of "neither war, nor peace", antagonism can be expected to remain disproportionately high. But does that mean that it remains on the same level? In recent years, scholars and analysts have become increasingly critical of the static assumptions underlying the notion of "frozen conflict". As Svante Cornell (2017, 2; emphasis added) has noted in regards to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, "the concept of frozenness falsely connotes a lack of dynamism, *as if the politics of the conflict are frozen in time and space.*" He (2017, 2) argues that "[t]he Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is far from frozen: it has in fact evolved considerably in the past 20 years, to the point that it has transcended the local, inter-communal conflict it initially was". While Cornell refers to the political and military dimension of frozen conflict, one can similarly argue that just because a conflict is "frozen" does not mean that the people concerned live in a vacuum where their attitudes and emotions never change or that they are simply derivative of official politics.

In contrast to what the notion of "frozen conflict" might suggest, people's attitudes towards past events might change over time, depending not only on their personal histories and experiences, but also on their interests and concerns in the present; after all, not everyone living in intractable conflict might want to be "stuck in the past" in the same way. Only recently, Caucasus expert Thomas De Waal (2019, n.p.) noted that in the post-Soviet *de facto* states "[l]ife goes on - taxes are collected and children go to school. But it is all a little more complicated than elsewhere in the world." Even though unrecognised states are often associated with liminality – Bryant (2014b, 126) for instance, describes them as "permanently liminal, stuck between the political form they once were and the recognized body politic they wish to become" – it is not only government elites who are eager to provide the impression of normality; in fact, it is often ordinary people who work relentlessly to "move on". Thus, while the conflict certainly constitutes an important part of people's lives, people on the ground also desire to rebuild some sense of normality and the management of (negative) emotions can be essential for this.

Focusing on the specific case of Abkhazia, this thesis is hence interested in how identities develop in the post-war context of "neither war, nor peace". Do identities remain polarised or are there also forms of resistance to ethnic antagonism? To what extent are relations determined by the violent past? To investigate these questions, this thesis goes beyond the focus on institutions and civil society actors that characterises much of the existing literature on *de facto* state- and nation-building (e.g. Caspersen 2008; Berg and Mölder 2012; Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013; Ó Beacháin 2015; Kopeček, Hoch, and Baar 2016). Instead, it is concerned with how ordinary people have come to terms with the war and how they have renegotiated their sense of belonging in its aftermath. Focusing on the dynamics of violence and identity predominantly through the lens of Abkhazians, the thesis also aims to provide a fresh perspective on the post-war social transformation beyond the predominant focus on IDPs. While there has been substantial academic interest in the situation of Georgian IDPs, in particular their continued sense of belonging and nostalgia for Abkhazia as their homeland (e.g. Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010, 2012; Grono 2011; Lundgren 2015; Toria 2015; Toria et al. 2019), considerably less is known about the reverse perspective, at least not beyond information provided by politicians and civil society activists.

One exception is the 2011 survey-based study of the attitudes of Abkhazia's population towards the former Georgians residents and the possibility of return by Gerard Toal and Magdalena Frichova Grono. According to the study, relations between Abkhazians and Georgians are not entirely "frozen" but surprisingly ambivalent. As it reveals, "[o]f all the ethnic groups in Abkhazia today, ethnic Abkhaz had the most negative feelings towards the Georgians at 35 percent; however, slightly more ethnic Abkhaz had positive feelings" (2011, 668). At the same time, over 70% of ethnic Abkhazians strongly agreed that "among the displaced there are those who should not be allowed to come back to Abkhazia" (2011, n. 669), referring to the Georgians who were involved in the fighting. The authors (2011, 669; emphasis added) hence conclude that "much conflict transformation work is still needed: interethnic relations and confidence between the groups have suffered serious damage and negative stereotypes have been cemented over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence in both surveys to suggest that *attitudes are not as overdetermined by the violent past and as polarized and enemy-defined as might be supposed.*"

However, while this study provides important insights into the general atmosphere on both sides, based on quantitative data it tells us little about the reasons *why* people choose certain answers over others. Neither does it take into account moments of doubt and uncertainty as well as situational and contextual variation in their attitudes and beliefs. To explore people's lived experience of frozen conflict, this thesis hence adopts an ethnographic lens, as I will elaborate in the next section.

1.4.   Methodology: studying violence and identity from below

To explore the relationship between identity and violence, the thesis is divided into two parts. Part I asks: to what extent is violence the outcome of ethnic antagonism? What was the role of identity in the outbreak of violence? And how does violence, once it unfolds, impact people's relations and identities? It thus traces the "multiple vocabularies of community" (Bergholz 2016, 5) that existed before the war, the role of ethnicity, the formation of a national movement, and the events leading to the outbreak of war and the impact of war itself. Part II examines the long-term consequences of violence and frozen conflict on people's constructions of self and other. It asks: how do identities develop when the "event" of violence is over? In contrast to part I, which adopts a historical lens, the second part is largely ethnographic and hence grounded in the present. However, both share an "ethnographic sensibility" (Schatz 2009). Moreover, both are concerned with Abkhazia as a whole while also being sensitive to local variations. My ethnographic research thus followed specific people and topics rather than being limited to certain locations.

In order to explore historical modes of identification, the first part relies mostly on textual sources, and, to a lesser degree, data collected through oral history interviews. The textual sources included existing historical research by historians and ethnographers both from the region and beyond. The problem with the use of local historiography – whether of Georgian or Abkhaz orientation – is of course that is has been heavily politicised both during and after the Soviet era. Whereas publications during the Soviet period had to be in line with the official Marxist-Leninist ideology and the friendship of people paradigm, post-Soviet publications often serve the political and strategic interests of the respective community of the

author. An important strategy in this context is triangulation, i.e. the use of multiple sources to increase validity. Where possible, I have complemented secondary sources with contemporaneous material, such as travelogues, essays and other publications by local and foreign figures, as well as a limited number of official documents, including the various protest letters sent by members of the Abkhaz elite to the centre in Moscow. Although these sources do not provide unfiltered insights into the experience of so-called "ordinary people" and are naturally shaped by the authors' own interests and experiences, they include insightful observations about the social and political conditions at the time.

In contrast, the reconstruction of people-to-people relations in late socialism is largely based on personal recollections. Some of these oral histories are the result of my own ethnographic research, but I was also fortunate to come across a collection of life histories of both Abkhaz and Georgian women from so-called mixed marriages, published in 2006 in Russian and Georgian, that provided a unique angle to explore ethnicity as lived experience. But to what extent can we trust people's recollections of the past? Scholars often caution not to treat memories as representations of what really happened, for they are significantly shaped by present concerns. This is more so in the context of violent conflict, where, due to the extreme and sudden changes to people's lives, there can be a tendency to present pre-war realities in overly positive terms – a phenomenon known as nostalgia, i.e. "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (Boym 2010, n.p.). But the opposite can be the case too, with people projecting current negative emotions onto the past, for example when they argue that they "always knew" that a war was coming. As Cornelia Sorabji (1995, 92) noted in the context of Bosnia, "[f]or some [...] the process of cleansing leads not to the conclusion that 'we all used to live happily together but then they changed', but to the conclusion that 'they always hated us; they were always waiting; Bosnia and neighbourliness was an illusion'."

What this shows is that memories are fundamentally situational and relational and should therefore not be treated as unfiltered representations of past events and experiences. Some scholars have therefore opted to look at narratives about the past not as a historical source but as a lens through which to study contemporary worldviews. For example, as Liisa Malkki (1995, 104) explained in her study of narratives about the past ("mythico-history") among Hutu refugees in Tanzania,

the Hutu mythico-history is not seen here as "oral history," in the sense of a historical "source" that can be used to reconstruct "what really happened" in the past. Again, such a utilization of the refugees' narratives would be possible. But the more challenging approach to such narratives, in my view, is not to sort out "true facts" from "distortions" but to examine what is taken to be the truth by different social groups, and why. Different regimes of truth exist for different historical actors, and particular historical events support any number of different narrative elaborations. Such regimes of truth operate at a mythico-historical level which is concerned which the constitution of an ontological, political, and moral order of the world.

And yet, the point of using narratives about the past is not necessarily to gain access to "what really happened", because – as Malkki rightly points out – there is no such thing as a single, objective reality to be captured – but to understand the various ways in which actors made sense of these events in the past and thus the multiple modes of identification that have been overshadowed, or actively suppressed, in the wake of war. To what extent this is possible, given how memories change over time, is a different question; but reducing our gaze to the dominant narratives in the present risks losing sight of the complexities of history.

During my fieldwork, I also encountered certain ethical challenges to the use of oral history. While my contacts enjoyed talking about pre-war times, their statements about the war itself tended to be vague, as if it was too hard to go there or they were afraid to say something wrong. Often, they would only sigh and say "I don't even want to think about this!". While this could be frustrating, it indicated an important boundary I had to respect. In order not to stir traumatic or sensitive memories, I relied on written sources – such as the detailed reports by Human Rights Watch (HRW) (1995) and the UN fact-finding mission (1993) – where possible. But the sighs and silences I encountered also showed the very limits of words, whether as speech or text, when it comes to the representation of the experience of violence and trauma. As anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (1997, 22–23) noted in her ethnography of the war in Mozambique,

> the widespread tendency in scholarly literature to focus on language, text, and narrative supports a possible unintended presupposition that these arenas constitute the core of communication and understanding. The ineffable events – non-discursive, nonverbal, and nontranscribable actions and behaviors – are difficult to render transparent in the way reproducible texts are. But they are equally communicative. Pain, for example, may not have a 'voice' [...], but it conveys and communicates.

Researchers cannot easily write terror or hope; [...]. But people who have experienced these realities know them, though they may not be able to narrate them.

Deciphering the unspoken or barely spoken requires a certain degree of intimacy. The second part of this thesis is hence largely based on data collected through long-term ethnographic fieldwork, in particular participant observation. Scholars in the field of everyday ethnicity and nationalism have traditionally largely relied on qualitative interviewing and focus groups. However, as a method that is holistic and inductive, participant observation has the advantage that it does not impose ethnicity as an analytical framework and instead attends to "a range of alternative, non-ethnicized ways of seeing and being" (Brubaker et al. 2006, 15). Moreover, as anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans (2013, 5) has pointed out, through its practice of "living for prolonged periods of time in the midst of people who are pondering different options, who are voicing their hopes, frustrations and disillusionments", ethnography is in the unique position to capture not only people's beliefs but also their doubts and disillusionments.

The process of data collection took place during eight months of fieldwork over a period of two years (starting in late 2016) in Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi and a village in the Ochamchira district, which had a mixed Georgian-Abkhaz population before the war and is now predominantly Abkhaz. I did not specifically "choose" this location in advance, but, as it is often the case in ethnographic research, "stumbled" upon it during my many visits to the Ochamchira region and, because I was so warmly welcomed, decided to return as often and for as long as possible. In addition to being based and moving between specific locations, I travelled around Abkhazia as much as I could, often visiting people I met in Sukhumi who were keen to introduce me to their extended family in the village. Consequently, although my research focuses on a number of specific locations within Abkhazia, it is not limited to these locations. Often, I simply followed my contacts wherever *they* went – and many of them moved between different locations, including the village and the city. On my way to and out of Abkhazia, I also had many conversations and encounters with Georgian refugees, which helped me to get a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict. Moreover, towards the end of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to accompany one of my key Abkhaz interlocutors on his first trip across

the conflict divide since the end of the war. This allowed me to observe both the connections and the divisions that still exist between Georgians and Abkhaz.

The locations that I chose were not only determined by the people whom I met in Sukhumi, but partly also by my decision to enter Abkhazia through Georgia. Although I initially hoped to travel through Russia, the practicalities of obtaining a long-term double-entry visa to Russia, which is necessary to enter Abkhazia, turned out to be too difficult. My main worry about travelling through Georgia was that people in Abkhazia would associate me with the "enemy", and therefore not be able to trust me. However, once I started my journeys across the Inguri river separating Abkhazia from "Georgia proper", I realised that travelling between them was in fact crucial for my understanding of the various positionalities of those involved in the conflict. While having to deal with what it means to come to Abkhazia from Georgia allowed me to understand what Abkhaz nationalism feels like for those who are not Abkhaz, encountering hostility among many Georgians on the other side when leaving Abkhazia made me understand the pain and frustration that many Abkhaz people felt and still feel when confronted with Georgian nationalism. Moving between the two positions ensured that I felt never too close to one side, and, as a consequence, made me empathise with the many people living in mixed families.

The problems associated with travelling through Georgia rather than Russia are closely intertwined with the issue of international non-recognition; while I, as someone who was born and raised in Austria, was not in principle seen as involved in the conflict, I was nevertheless from a part of the world that has not only not recognised Abkhazia's independence but also ignored the grievances of its people more generally. This put me in a position where I was exposed to certain levels of resentment and mistrust, whether outright or subtle. At the same time, I also encountered a great deal of curiosity and openness especially among so-called "ordinary people" (*prostoi narod*) which allowed me to participate in their lives and interact in an open and relaxed manner. After all, I was a young woman from "Europe" and therefore someone rarely anyone outside of the well-educated elite had ever encountered in real life, or at least not since most of the UN humanitarian workers who were active in Abkhazia after the war had left. In this sense, the people I spent time with studied me as much as I studied them. As one of my key interlocutors once said, "Andrea, I know you think *you* study us, but we study you too; only we don't write a book about it!" But this also meant that I benefitted

from a certain degree of "white privilege", for similar access might not have been granted to a person of colour, especially from a low- or middle-income country.

In her ethnographic study of Northern Cyprus, anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, xii) argues that for her, having been born in Istanbul and being in a relationship with a well-known Turkish poet who was born in Northern Cyprus was a resource rather than an obstacle: "Against a colonial conceptualization of research in which students of anthropology assume that the world is a laboratory from which they can pick and choose sites for fieldwork, I would argue that only certain spaces and themes make themselves available and accessible for study by certain people." While I agree that as a foreigner there were limits to the intimacy I could reach and hence the knowledge I could access, there were advantages too. Being an outsider could open up a space for people to voice doubts, to adopt new perspectives on old issues and to broach topics that would be considered "taboo" according to Abkhaz standards. As important as it was to show respect for local codes of behaviour, at times it was also liberating not to follow them too closely, not only for me but also for my interlocutors.

Overall, forty-five people participated in my research, out of which ten were so-called "key informants", with whom I was in contact on a regular basis.[5] Among them were farmers, teachers, petty traders, racketeers, taxi drivers, and nurses, i.e. they were non-elite, non-expert actors. Given my thematic focus, my interlocutors were predominantly – but not exclusively – ethnic Abkhazians who still remember peaceful pre-war cohabitation while also having had first-hand experience of the violence during the war. Although I was expected to bond with local women of a similar age, my encounters were mixed in terms of gender; however, it was often men who spoke more extensively.[6] While many of my male contacts fought in the war, none of them identified as having been involved in atrocities against Georgians. I did not push participants to share sensitive information; to borrow Liisa Malkki's (1995, 51) words, "the success of the fieldwork hinged not so much on a determination to ferret out 'the facts' as on a willingness to leave some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted."

---

[5] After receiving initial support from civil society activists, I met most of my key informants by chance.
[6] This is similar to what Malkki (1995, 50) observed among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, where "women seemed to be less accustomed and to feel less of an entitlement, to assume authorship of narrative expression."

Given my long-term presence and the changing nature of interactions, informed consent was sought verbally at various stages of the project. I ensured that participants were aware of my identity as a researcher and the purpose of the project from the first meeting and reminded them of my role whenever sensitive information was disclosed to allow them to withdraw their consent and share information off the record. I also informed them that their information will be anonymised and treated as strictly confidential and sought their consent for the possibility of using it for publication. Despite the current political stability and freedoms enjoyed by residents in Abkhazia, signed forms of consent were avoided because of the general distrust towards official procedures in a post-communist, post-war context and the possibility of negative repercussions that are often associated with such procedures.

Throughout this thesis, I quote from informal conversations written down post factum and – to a lesser extent – from taped interviews.[7] To understand how people categorised themselves and others, I was particularly interested in the collective narratives that my participants employed when talking about the violent events of the early 90s and how life has changed since. Consequently, in contrast to the historical part of the thesis, here I did not look at narratives so much as a window into the past than as "accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent[ing] the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity" (Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006, 20) that "address issues not only about what happened but also about why it happened and who or what was responsible" (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014, 29).

The analysis of the data proceeded in two steps: First, I identified recurring statements and themes through thematic analysis. Drawing on ethnographic approaches to narrative analysis (Bauman 1986; Cortazzi 2007; Gubrium and Holstein 2008), I then analysed their *narrative structure*, i.e. what kind of stories are being told and how they both reflect and constitute boundaries between self and other, victim and perpetrator, as well as their *narrative environment*, more specifically the "social situations, their actors, and action in relation to narratives" (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, 250). Consequently, I paid attention both to the content and to performative aspects of story-telling. As Martin Cortazzi (2007, 388) has

---

[7] Given the sensitivity of the topic, the anonymity of my research participants takes first priority. Throughout the text, I will therefore provide only minimal personal information about my informants. All names are pseudonyms.

noted "[t]he elements of narrative analysis [...] not only involve stories, variously defined, and their content as units of analysis, but other elements too, which take account of an ethnographic regard for a holistic concern with context and integral aspects of cultural interpretation. Besides the actual story – *the told* – other elements include the teller, and the *audience*, and their respective *relationships* to each other and to the told."

To contextualise the data collected during participant observation and understand the broader societal significance of the issues that my participants brought up, I also used a variety of written sources, including news articles. Finally, it is important to note that while the aim of fieldwork was to collect *other people's* stories and interpret them, as an ethnographer, I inevitably became part of the story. As a young, unmarried woman, I was navigating a complex field that was often friendly and welcoming, but also risky and uncomfortable. There were many places I was discouraged from visiting and people I was discouraged from talking to (or to be seen with) because they were considered to be unsafe, untrustworthy or simply suspicious. While I was lucky to have contacts with whose assistance I was able to push certain boundaries, there were many limitations and challenges that I faced and that ultimately shaped the nature of this research.

However, while these experiences – which are so common for women – seem to fall short of the hegemonic ideal of ethnography as detached and objective that is based on "white men's experience of conducting research" (Hanson and Richards 2019, 40), they are also what distinguishes ethnography from other forms of qualitative research and as such deserve sustained attention. Therefore, while being a foreign woman felt like a constraint, it is precisely these constraints which heightened my sensitivity to local social and power dynamics. For as I came to realise, these stories were not only about me, but reflective of the challenges that my interlocutors encountered on a regular basis. In the words of Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards (2019, 17), "[h]ow others respond to our bodies, where we are allowed to go and with whom we are allowed to associate, and the types of violence and dangers we experience while conducting research all tell us about the systems of power that structure our field sites." Therefore, while I did not want to write myself into the text, I will also address my own experience and connect it to that of my contacts where relevant.

1.5.   Structure of the thesis

The rest of this thesis consists of six chapters and the conclusion. Chapters 2-4 look at the making, and eventually unmaking of multi-ethnic Abkhazia. Chapter 2 begins with a historical exploration of the shifting perceptions of "us" and "them" before the establishment of Soviet rule. Existing sources suggest that hostility vis-à-vis Georgians only began to take hold following a combination of traumatic events that nourished a fear of ethnic extinction that was increasingly channelled into mistrust towards the Georgian state and people, and in particular the Mingrelians. However, while a vocabulary of ethnic antagonism seems to have entered political debates of the early 20th century, the chapter also demonstrates that contrary to the claim that "Abkhazia always wanted to be free from Georgia", as one of my research participants put it, Georgian-Abkhaz relations were not always hostile.

Concentrating on the Soviet period, and in particular late socialism, chapter 3 shifts the focus to the understudied sphere of everyday relations. It argues that although there were growing tensions on the political level, political antagonism did not keep ordinary people from establishing close and meaningful relationships in their everyday lives. Contrary to the widespread belief that internationalism was an ideology imposed by the regime that failed to take hold among a population who identified first and foremost nationally, the chapter reveals that ethnicity was not the primary – or exclusive – lens through which people viewed their relationships. In fact, there was a regional, "inter-national" identity that united people from different ethnicities. This was particularly the case in Sukhumi, where people could identify as much as *Sukhumchane* as they identified as members of their respective ethnic group. There was also a significant number of so-called mixed Georgian-Abkhaz families, particularly in the east of Abkhazia, due to similarities in traditions and customs. This shows that local specificities continued to be powerful markers of identity that were not necessarily superseded by ethnic categorisation.

Chapter 4 explores the increasing ethnic mobilisation in the late 1980s. It demonstrates that, while society became more and more polarised along ethnic lines from the late 1980s onwards, large-scale violence was ultimately provoked by the elite-level decision to send military troops into Abkhazia. Once unleashed, violence developed a dynamic of its own, triggering a process of antagonistic collective categorisation that paved the way for the eventual ethnic cleansing of the Georgian

population. This does not mean that groupness was not already at a high level; tensions clearly existed before the war and they did have an impact on the events that unfolded; however, they did not themselves serve as a trigger. The chapter thus demonstrates the power of violence to harden identity, while also showing that other, non-ethnic modes of belonging were not automatically suspended.

Looking beyond the "event" of war, chapter 5 explores the post-war process of identity re-construction within Abkhazia, which, despite ethnic cleansing, remained far from ethnically "pure": First, there was the legacy of Georgian-Abkhaz intermarriage, and second, there remained a large number of people that categorically belonged to other, non-Georgian nationalities, such as Armenians and Russians. The chapter identifies two tendencies: First, the war strengthened the sense of victimhood among the Abkhaz as the victims of Georgian aggression and thus turned them into a proper "group" or nation. While the experience of war and violence fostered solidarity, cohesion and fear among the Abkhaz, it simultaneously heightened mistrust vis-à-vis ethnic others, who were perceived as a potential threat. But in addition to this form of exclusive ethnic nationalism, there was also a counter-discourse, in which neither the victim nor the enemy was defined in ethnic terms. Instead, the opponent was defined in terms of a chauvinistic nationalism or imperialism bound to destroy peaceful internationalist co-existence. The result was a form of internationalism based on a shared experience of war-time suffering and post-war hardship; however, this internationalism was no longer grounded in people's everyday experiences to the extent that it was in Soviet times.

Chapter 6, in turn, examines the various ways in which the absence of the Georgian population manifests itself. Based on detailed ethnographic data, it shows how the condition of protracted conflict has not only sustained war-time trauma and hostility over prolonged periods of time, but also how the removal of the "enemy" and the subsequent reconfiguration of power within Abkhazia has shifted the focus from inter-group to *intra*-group divisions. This was most evident in relation to the arbitrary appropriation of evacuated properties (so-called "trophy houses"), which is widely perceived as an injustice not only towards the original (Georgian) owners but also the Abkhaz community at large. The chapter thus challenges the implicit assumption that the displaced have been the only ones negatively affected by population transfer by capturing the practical difficulties, unforeseen repercussions and ethical dilemmas of attempts to create homogeneity in a previously diverse

place as well as the informal forms of inter-ethnic cooperation that exist across the conflict divide. In addition, it analyses the social and cultural effects of displacement and depopulation on the remaining ethnic Abkhazian residents, focusing on interactions between "old" and "new" inhabitants of Sukhumi (many of whom moved into the trophy houses) and the tensions that arose between co-ethnics as a consequence of internal migration and the feelings of loss and longing for one's old neighbours that emerged as a result.

Whereas chapter 6 largely focuses on absences, chapter 7 explores renewed contact between so-called enemies across the conflict divide. Over the past few years, more and more Abkhaz have been travelling to Georgia. What are the implications of this renewed cross-border movement? Is it a step towards reconciliation or even re-unification? Based on an analysis of the motives and expectations and, to some extent, the experience of Abkhaz people travelling to Georgia, I suggest that crossing the conflict line is not an act that is simply subversive; it is also a consequence of the very normalisation of the Abkhazian state among its residents that has been taking place since the end of the war. I argue that although the image of the "Georgian enemy" has become deeply entrenched in Abkhazian society since the end of the war in 1993 and the *de facto* division between Abkhazia and Georgia has been growing, the physical and temporal separation also contributed to an increasing curiosity vis-à-vis the Other. While cross-border contact is therefore not indicative of a desire for re-integration into a Georgian state, it can nevertheless be read as indicative of a desire for a normalisation of relations as neighbours.

In the concluding chapter 8, I discuss the main findings of this study, how it contributes to the existing scholarship and the ways in which future research on this subject might develop.

PART I.

THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF SOVIET ABKHAZIA

Chapter 2.   Emptied Land: The Making of Soviet Abkhazia

In July 2016 I had a meeting with a professor of history at the Academy of Sciences in Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi. At that time, I was particularly interested in the Soviet period. How much autonomy did Abkhazia actually have? What did the preferential treatment of ethnic Abkhazians look like in practice? The professor (Daur) listened to my questions carefully and, after a long moment of silence, he took a piece of paper and began to sketch the map of the "Kingdom of Abkhazia", insisting that if I wanted to understand events during Soviet times, we had to go much further back in history.

He explained that before Tsar Leon of Abkhazia expanded his kingdom to Svanetia and Mingrelia and incorporated all of western Georgia, Abkhazia used to be "monoethnic". It was only when Leon's last direct successor died that an ethnic Georgian, who was a distant relative, came to power. As the kingdom expanded towards the east, the Abkhaz became a smaller and smaller part of the population, despite their key role in the foundation and expansion of the kingdom. Over time, the kingdom thus became predominantly Georgian until it was dissolved as a consequence of the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. At the end of his lecture, Daur sighed: "For 800 years we have wanted to live separately!"

Daur drew an immediate connection between "the Abkhaz" today and the people living 800 years ago as if they were identical, thus projecting current ethnic categories onto the past in order to prove a point relevant to the present – namely that Abkhazia deserves to be an independent state. This was a common phenomenon among historians (and laymen). Conversations (or rather lectures) about history, it seemed, were always really about contemporary politics, which was one of the reasons why I was often hesitant to talk about history in the first place. Since the purpose of the production of historical knowledge in post-war Abkhazia, like in other societies in intractable conflict, was not primarily to "establish factual truth but to serve societal needs" (Bar-Tal 2013, 138), history was first and foremost a useful lens through which to study *contemporary* concerns and concepts.

This chapter, however, is an attempt to move beyond the study of how history has been instrumentalised for present purposes and, instead, explores the shifting constructions of "us" and "them" throughout history. What forms of identification existed across different periods? And when, and to what extent, did ethnicity and nationalism become "a relevant category and ideology through which conflict was

channelled" (Bergholz 2016, 13)? Hence, the aim of this chapter is not merely to provide the obligatory historical background, but to problematise existing accounts of history. To do so, it looks beyond the Soviet period. Most analysts of the conflict focus on the period immediately before the war (the 1980s), but even those who adopt a longer-term perspective usually take the establishment of Soviet rule as their starting point and mention earlier events only in passing. This chapter departs from this approach by paying particular attention to two "events" that are commonly singled out as "fateful" but rarely receive detailed consideration. This is the forced resettlement of large numbers of ethnic Abkhazians to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, also known as *makhadzhirstvo*, which dramatically altered the demographic composition of the region. Another major "event" predating Soviet rule was the three-year long Georgian Menshevik rule that followed the dissolution of the Russian Empire.

What the chapter shows is that the idea of a Georgian "enemy" is rather recent. Even though the Abkhaz were culturally and linguistically tightly linked to the various Circassian tribes of the north Caucasus, there was in fact a close political association with (what is today) Georgia from the early 11th century, when it became part of the Kingdom of Abkhazia and Georgia. The two events mentioned above, and in particular the forced resettlement of the Abkhaz under Russian imperial rule, fundamentally altered these dynamics, but, at the same time, there is no evidence of any immediate ethnic antagonism. The notion of the "Georgian enemy" only seemed to have taken a clear shape in the political discourse after the oppressive policies under Stalin from the 1930s to the 1950s, which will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

2.1.   The Abkhaz: from antiquity to Ottoman rule

Although Abkhazia is located south of the Caucasian mountain range, along the Black Sea coast, the Abkhaz are closely related, both culturally and linguistically, to the Circassians (Adyg) in the northwest Caucasus. Together with Abaza, Adyghe, Kabardian and Ubykh, which became extinct in 1992, their language belongs to the north-west or west Caucasian linguistic group and is therefore different from the south Caucasian or Kartvelian languages of Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan

(Chirikba 1996, 2–3).[8] The Abkhaz also have cultural similarities with the other so-called "mountain peoples" of the North Caucasus, such as the Ossets, Chechens and Ingush, with whom they share the heritage of the Nart epics (see Colarusso 2002). In the past, "these peoples and other related groups in the North Caucasus maintained close ties until they were divided by modern transportation lines that made direct travel to one another impossible" (Garb 1994, 5). As Stephen D. Shenfield (2008, n.p.), has noted, the Abkhaz can thus be considered "the sole 'mountain people' of the South Caucasus, tucked into the northwest corner of that region, where the mountains meet the sea."

Figure 2. Topographic map of the Caucasus. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Historically, some authors trace the Abkhaz back to the ancient tribes of the Apsilians and Abazgoi, who were first mentioned in the 1st century AD by Pliny Secundus (the Elder) and then again a century later by Arrian in his *Voyage around the Black Sea* (Hewitt 2013, 18). At that time, the territory of Abkhazia came under the control of the Roman Empire, later followed by the Byzantine Empire. In the 6th century AD, the local population officially adopted Christianity under Byzantium's Justinian I (Garb 1994, 64). Before the arrival of the Romans, Abkhazia was part of

---

[8] "Kartvelian" is used to describe *all* South Caucasian languages. The specific term for Georgian is "kartlian".

the Colchis region, which is known as a destination of the Argonauts and home of the Golden Fleece in Greek mythology.

Abkhazia first appeared as an independent political entity at the end of the 8th century under the Abkhazian potentate Leon II. The "Kingdom of Abkhazia" became "one of the most powerful early-feudal states in the Caucasus" (Bgazhba 1999, 61) and comprised modern-day Abkhazia as well as the whole of today's western Georgia (Hewitt 2013, 19–22). It lasted for two centuries, during which time, Abkhaz historians argue, the different Abkhazian tribes consolidated into a single ethnicity and an "Abkhazian feudal nationality" emerged (Bgazhba 1999, 61). However, it was far from a nation-state in the modern sense: at the time, people lived in small, militarised communities consisting of kin groups, which "exploited the land and had common pasturage and hunting territories which were contested among the groups and defended against the encroachment of neighbours" (Costello 2015, 40). According to Abkhaz anthropologist Shalva Inal-Ipa (2010, 12), throughout history, communities were frequently ransacked by predatory gangs and adventurers from different mountain societies" and "[t]he population was under eternal fear of attack and the stealing of people and animals". As a consequence, "Abkhazians never left home without weapons" (2010, 12), developing what historian Lakoba (1999, 85) has called a "psychology of a warrior people".

In 1008, the Kingdom of Abkhazia was united with the Kartvelian-speaking regions in the east and was subsequently referred to as the "Kingdom of Abkhazians and Georgians", also known as the Kingdom of Georgia (Hewitt 2013, 20–21). By the 12th century, it reached almost double the size of contemporary Georgia, covering parts of what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan. After the invasion of the Mongols in the second half of the 13th century, the kingdom dissolved into various smaller kingdoms and princedoms, including the princedom of Abkhazia, which continued to interact closely. Subsequently, parts of today's Abkhazia became ruled by the Chachba-Shervashidze clan whose rule was regularly contested by the Dadiani princes from neighbouring Mingrelia (Bgazhba 1999, 64). Thus, despite the cultural and linguistic connection of the Abkhaz to the North Caucasus, Abkhazia has long held a "dual orientation" due to the geographical proximity to the Kartvelian (Georgian) "tribes", in particular the Mingrelians and the Svans.[9] According to Shenfield (2008, n.p.),

---

[9] Today, Mingrelians and Svans are often referred to as Georgian "ethnic sub-groups".

> [t]he Abkhaz nobility became integrated not only into the proto-Georgian states system, but also into the corresponding proto-Georgian culture, using the proto-Georgian (Kartlian) language for purposes of diplomacy, Christian religious liturgy, and literature. The bilingualism of the ruling dynasty was reflected in its dual names: Chachba in Abkhaz, Shervashidze in Georgian. Abkhaz in this period was the unwritten language of the common people.

At the same time as struggles went on between the Chachba princes and the Dadianis from neighbouring Mingrelia over different parts of modern-day Abkhazia, Genoese trading posts appeared on the territory, most notably Sebastopolis (contemporary Sukhumi), which became a significant port with a multi-ethnic population, including Mingrelians, Armenians, Jews and Muslims (Bgazhba 1999, 65). The Genoese colonial system lasted until the end of the 15th century. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, Abkhazia came under Ottoman control and parts of the local population converted to Sunni Islam.[10]

Throughout the 18th century, several rebellions took place against Ottoman rule (Inal-Ipa 1960, 67). In 1803, two years after eastern Georgia was incorporated into the Russian Empire, the Abkhaz prince Keleshbey Chachba sought rapprochement with Russia with the intention to free himself of Turkey's protectorate (Lakoba 1999, 68). However, after the Turks were defeated, relations with Russia soon deteriorated. According to Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba, Keleshbey died in a plot organised by the Russian military administration, for which they then blamed his son Aslanbey. However, while the Russian rulers recognised his other son, Seferbey, as the legitimate hereditary prince, Aslanbey enjoyed great support among the population. In 1810, a raid was organised against Aslanbey and his supporters and Sukhumi was captured by the Russian military. As a consequence, up to 5000 Abkhazians were resettled to Turkey that year, which, according to Lakoba (1999, 74; see also Achugba 2010, 97–98), was the first wave of Abkhaz emigration in the 19th century.

---

[10] Once Abkhazia became a Russian protectorate in the early 19th century, Christian Orthodoxy was re-introduced by the Tsarist regime. But as Rachel Clogg (1999, 205) has noted, religious practice never fit any pre-established categories and is best understood as a "complex synthesis involving aspects of polytheistic worship and animism, which has evolved over time to include aspects of the two world religions with which the Abkhaz have come into contact."

2.2.　"Guilty nation": the *makhadzhirstvo* and the re-making of Abkhazia

Although Abkhazia was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1810, Russian control was only fully consolidated after its victory in the Caucasian Wars in 1864 (Blauvelt 2007, 206). It was at this time that relations with the Russian Empire further deteriorated. In 1864, Russia abolished the autonomous Abkhazian princedom, which was reorganised into the Sukhum military sector and later renamed the Sukhum military district (Lakoba 1999, 81). In 1866, a few months after the death of Abkhazia's last ruler, Mikhail Shervashidze (Chachba), who had been arrested and resettled by Russian forces, an anti-colonial uprising broke out. On the 26th of July 1866, Abkhazian peasants killed the head of the Sukhum military sector as well as several officials, officers and Cossacks (1999, 82). The uprising was triggered by a reform that intended to free the peasants from serfdom in exchange for a certain ransom. This, Lakoba (1999, 76) argues, was perceived as "insulting", for unlike in neighbouring Mingrelia, no serfdom existed in Abkhazia. The Russian administration had thus failed "to take note of the local particularities of this tiny country [...]. The peasants, deeming themselves to be already free, were perturbed, but the princes and nobles were insulted that they, it appeared, were 'ruling' not free people but 'slaves'" (1999, 76).

According to Lakoba (1999, 76), Abkhazia "occupied an intermediate position between the democratic, liberal societies of the mountaineers of the North West Caucasus and the feudal system of Georgia", but was tightly linked with the Ubykh-Circassian world in terms of its social organisation. Unlike in Mingrelia and other parts of modern Georgia, Abkhaz peasants were allowed to possess land. The fundamental basis of Abkhazia's social structure was the village-community, which united people from different strata. This was fostered through the custom of milk kinship, whereby some children of the nobility were brought up by peasant families in order to ensure close, blood-like ties between society's highest and lowest strata and reduce social antagonism.[11] As Lakoba (1999, 77) explains, "[t]he peasants

---

[11] According to this custom, consanguineal kinship is created by suckling breastmilk. As Peter Parkes (2004, 591) explains, "Abkhazian milk kinship could be extended by symbolic suckling at the breast, incorporating adults as well as infants, with identical moral obligations and impediments on marriage to those created through infant fosterage. Ritual adoption by token suckling or 'breast-biting' (*ak'ukatshara*) was employed to defuse suspicions of adultery or to create conciliatory milk kinship after blood-feud."

vigilantly defended popular custom from any encroachments on the part of the highest estates and constituted the fundamental moral pivot of the Abkhazian community. The peasant was the very symbol of a free man. There are well known cases when some of these had renounced aristocratic titles and boasted of their 'pure' peasant origin."

The rebellion against the peasant reform, which culminated in an unsuccessful attempt to restore the princedom and instate Giorgii Chachba as the ruler of Abkhazia, was countered with harsh measures against the local population. In 1867, up to 20,000 Abkhazians and other related ethnicities were forced to resettle to the Ottoman Empire, an event that has become known as *makhadzhirstvo*. According to Lakoba (1999, 83), "[t]sarism had a need of Abkhazia devoid of Abkhazians and insurgents, whilst Turkey had need of a warrior people." As a consequence, the historical region of Dal-Tsabal, today's Gulripsh district east of Sukhumi, was entirely vacated. A second wave of mass emigration occurred between 1877 and 1890 when some Abkhaz supported Turkey in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. After an attack on Sukhumi by Turkish troops, which partly comprised Abkhaz exiles (*makhadzhirs*), the entire Abkhaz population was declared a "guilty nation". Several hundred thousand people were forced to resettle, leaving large parts of central Abkhazia – from the Kodori river east of today's Sukhumi to the river Psyrtskha near Novii Afon – depopulated (Lakoba 1999, 83). The remaining Abkhaz population was punished through a decree that ordered them to live at least five kilometres from the sea and twenty kilometres away from Sukhumi (Agumaa 1999, 8). While the Abkhaz had always traditionally settled in the mountains, "avoiding the once swampy shores of the Black Sea and the constant risk of malaria" (Benet 1974, 1), this significantly contributed to the emergence of an urban-rural divide in Abkhazia along ethnic lines.

The empty lands were resettled by "Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Russians, Estonians, Germans and others, but most of all Mingrelians" (Lakoba 1999, 83; see also Müller 1999; Gegeshidze and Haindrava 2011). Among the reasons why many Mingrelians resettled was the abolishment of serfdom in Mingrelia in 1867. According to Abkhaz historian Temur Achugba (2010, 167), unofficial immigration of Mingrelians already existed before the large-scale displacement of Abkhaz people, mostly to the eastern Samurzakan region, which, located between the river Ghalidze near Ochamchira to the west and the Inguri river to the east, had long been "a bone

of contention between the ruling houses of most of Abkhazia, and of Mingrelia"
(Müller 1999, 220). As it provided refuge to Mingrelians who fled cruel feudal
exploitation, Achugba (2010, 170) calls Samurzakan Abkhazia's "vol'nitsa", a term
that describes a community of people who escaped the harsh conditions of serfdom.
This earlier migration, so Achugba (2010, 170), happened against the will of the
Mingrelian prince, and in some cases, Mingrelian settlers were forced to return to
Mingrelia by the Russian administration.

But even after the *makhadzhirstvo*, the large-scale resettlement of
Mingrelians did not happen immediately. Initially, the Russian administration
sought to settle reliable, loyal Russian farmers to the emptied lands, but as the
requests to send settlers from other parts of the Russian Empire received little
interest, it had to consider the option to resettle non-Russian foreigners, which at
that time were mostly Anatolian Greeks from the Ottoman Empire (Achugba 2010,
166). There were also a number of Moldovan settlements established both left and
right of the river Psou (2010, 115). From the 1870s onwards, immigration took on a
more active and extensive character. Between 1879 and 1884, numerous Russian,
Greek, Armenian, Estonian, German and Mingrelian settlements were founded
across Abkhazia (2010, 121).

To facilitate the newcomers' adaptation, they were provided with land as
well as material support, such as cattle, and financial support, including a generous
tax exemption and free medical treatment in the case of illness. However, this could
not prevent the death of thousands due to malaria and other diseases related to the
harsh climatic conditions. For instance, an eyewitness observed how 27 German
families, having arrived in August in good health, had turned into the living dead by
September. And according to the newspaper *Kavkaz*, 665 people arrived at the
settlements of the Gumista region within three years, out of which 318 were forced
to leave Abkhazia due to severe illness. Yet, this did not stop the administration from
bringing in new settlers. In some cases, the administration would simply replace the
dead population of a village with new settlers. For instance, in 1879, 80 peasants
were settled to the village of Baklanovka. After they died from malaria, a new group
of settlers was sent there, who also soon died, but were again replaced (2010, 124–
25).

As the whole of central Abkhazia became empty and many of the Russian
farmers struggled with the local climate, the Russian administration began to

consider Mingrelian resettlement as a more feasible option. According to Achugba (2010, 168), "if earlier the Mingrelians in Abkhazia lived secretly from the authorities and then as servants of the local nobility, from now on, especially after the last stage of the mass exodus of Abkhazians from their homeland, they received the official right to permanent settlement." The main practical argument was that as a "neighbouring people", the Mingrelians were best suited to adapt to the climate, for Abkhazia's "population-density was very low in huge fertile areas, the health hazards of which (like malaria) the neighbouring Mingrelians were additionally better prepared to brave than people from other climes" (Müller 1999, 221).

According to Lakoba (1999, 83), the only territory that remained untouched by the *makhdzhirstvo* was Samurzakan (or Samurzakano in Georgian) in the east. And yet, as a contested borderland region, the local population had long been exposed to multiple cultural and linguistic influences and did not therefore always fit into clear-cut ethnic categories. In fact, "Samurzakan" even appeared as a distinct census category in the so-called family lists that were compiled by the authorities in 1886, suggesting that census takers faced difficulties in classifying inhabitants as either Abkhaz or Mingrelian. This ambiguity has continued to cause significant disagreement between historians. Were the "Samurzaq'anoans" Abkhaz or Georgians (Mingrelians)? As one can imagine, the question of their "real" identity is deeply political. As Daniel Müller (1999, 224) has noted,

> the Samurzaq'anoans are the bone of contention between Abkhaz and Georgians. According to the Family Lists, they were actually the most numerous group of all. Some (pro-)Abkhaz scholars have stated the percentage of Abkhaz in Abkhazia for 1886 to have been 85.7 per cent; that clearly is an addition of Abkhaz plus Samurzaq'anoans […]. On the other hand, some (pro-)Georgian scholars have claimed that actually they, the "Georgians", were in a majority of 50.6 per cent, clearly arriving at this by adding all Kartvelians […] to the Samurzaq'anoans'.

Achugba (2006), for instance, has argued that the inhabitants of Samurzakan were most likely ethnic Abkhazians who became increasingly "Mingrelianised", linguistically and culturally, as a consequence of the forced emigration of Abkhaz on the one hand, and the immigration of Mingrelians on the other. He claims that many had been given Mingrelian surnames by Georgian priests working in the region and were later officially categorised as Mingrelians on the basis of these church registers. The renaming usually happened during baptism and without the knowledge of the

families concerned, who neither understood Georgian nor knew how to read and write (Achugba 2010, 183).[12] Some evidence can be found in the writings of the famous Abkhaz writer Dmitry Gulia (2003, 350) who noted in 1912 that

> [s]ince the days of Russian rule, i.e. since 1810, only Georgians were appointed here as spiritual shepherds and preachers of the Word of God, who did not know a word of either the local nor the state language, and were even poorly literate in their own native, Georgian language. Such priests merely occupied the position, receiving their salaries and spent their time adapting Abkhaz surnames and the names of villages into Georgian ones. For example, Maan to Marganiia, Achba to Anchabadze, Inal-ipa to Inalishvili, Shat-ipa to Sotishvili and so on.

Georgian historians, on the other hand, have argued that Samurzakan was historically Mingrelian. The American scholar Cory Welt (2014, 227n22) has summarised the "pro-Georgian" reading of history as follows:

> The demography and even identity of Samurzaqano residents is sufficiently fluid to render determination of its ethnic composition virtually impossible. The region was part of the principality of Samegrelo (Mingrelia) until the 1670s, when the region was invaded and annexed by Abkhazia and experienced an influx of Abkhazian settlers.[13] Georgian chroniclers report that the region had already been heavily depopulated as a result of prior Abkhazian and Turkish invasions. How many Mingrelians, if any, remained in the region or returned after the Abkhazian occupation is unknown. In the nineteenth century, the ethnic identity of "Samurzaqanoas" became a matter of some debate. Russian (and later Soviet) censuses generally alternated in labeling them Abkhazians or Georgians (Mingrelians), with the census closest to the Russian Revolution recording them as the latter.

The debate over the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of Samurzakan that Welt refers to took place in 1899 between Konstantin Machavariani, who was born in the village of Okumi and, it is believed, the Mingrelian intellectual Ted Sakhokia (under the pseudonym "Samurzakan") that was published in the pages of the *Chernomorskii Vestnik*. While Sakhokia argued that they were historically Mingrelians, Machavariani held the opposite view, insisting that "[i]n the [18]50s you would almost never hear Mingrelian anywhere in Samurza'qano" (quoted in Hewitt 2013,

---

[12] According to Gulia (2003, 350), even though officially labelled Christians, few of the local people at that time understood the meaning of the Christian rituals they participated in.
[13] Bgazhba (1999, 65), on the other hand, argues that the resettlement of Abkhaz peasants only restored "the ethnic frontier between Abkhazians and Kartvelians, which until the start of the second millennium of our era had extended as far as the River Ingur".

30).

Figure 3. Map of Abkhazia and Samurzakan (1899). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

What this debate reveals is that the language of ethnicity already played an important role in intellectual circles. As such, it is strikingly similar to contemporary debates among historians (and ethnic entrepreneurs). But what about the self-understanding of the local actors themselves? Observations by visitors attest to the existence of a hybrid borderland culture. For example, the French scientist Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux (1937, 163), who visited the Caucasus in 1833, noted that "[i]nside Samurzakan' notably little is known. The inhabitants are Georgians and Abkhazians; they speak in one and another language." In 1835, the Russian officer Tornau (quoted in Dzidzaria 1976, 206) wrote: "Samurzakan', which was previously a separate entity, but ranked as Abkhazia during the administration by the prince from the Shervashidze family, is now attached to Mingrelia. It is difficult to exactly determine the origin of the people inhabiting it. Speaking partly Abkhazian, partly Mingrelian, their features do not differ sharply from either of the two neighboring people." Similarly, Georgian scholar Dmitrii Bakradze (quoted in Achugba 2010, 50) is said to have called the Samurzakans a "mix of Abkhazians and Mingrelians", even though he categorised them historically as ethnic Abkhazians.

Achugba (2010, 128) argues that by the end of the 1880s, several Abkhaz villages were inhabited by Mingrelians, who mostly engaged in agriculture, but also trade. But there was also a significant Armenian population that arrived after the anti-Armenian pogroms in the Ottoman Empire between 1894-6 and during the First World War (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2013, 2082). Armenians and Greeks were particularly active in the cultivation of tobacco, which was in growing demand on the Russian market, whereas ethnic Abkhazians mostly engaged in subsistence agriculture (Achugba 2010, 134). In 1907, the Tsarist authorities finally ceased their discriminatory treatment of the Abkhaz because of their "non-involvement" in the anti-tsarist revolutionary movements of 1905. According to Lakoba (1999, 85), this was due to the Abkhaz lacking a commercial-financial orientation: "Abkhazians were not concerned with trade, seasonal work or working as day-labourers, considering such occupations as 'ignominious'" and were therefore not able to relate to the ideology that spurred the 1905 revolutionary movements. But the political shift from a policy of the "cudgel" between 1810-1880 to a policy of the "cake" (Lakoba 1999, 87) could not hide the fact that by the beginning of the 20th century the remaining Abkhaz population had not only become marginalised numerically, but had also suffered in terms of its social, economic and cultural development. Even after 1907, they remained geographically concentrated in the historical regions of Bzyb (Gudauta), Abzhwa (Ochamchira) and Samurzakan, whereas the central regions, including Sukhumi and its surroundings as well as Gagra and the whole historical Sadzen region (between the rivers Bzyb and Hosta near Sochi) were predominantly inhabited by members of other nationalities (Achugba 2010, 136).

According to the Abkhaz writer Samsun Chanba (1886-1937), large parts of the Abkhaz population were completely cut off from Abkhazia's general development. In July 1911, he described the situation of the Abkhaz peasants in the newspaper *Zakavkazkaia rech'* as follows:

> Amidst the rich, luxurious nature of the Sukhum district, the Abkhaz peasant is forced to live in poverty and misery. What explains this situation of the Abkhaz is that he does not know how to skilfully use the gifts of nature given to him, because he finds himself in the dark, does not have the education that would help him to improve his life. At present, the wealth of Abkhazia is not used by the owners themselves but by outsiders. All of Abkhazia has been covered with tobacco plantations, and every year more than a million poods [Russian unit of weight] of tobacco are exported from this fertile Arcadia; so that outsiders are cashing in, and the Abkhazians themselves are gradually getting poorer. In the whole

of Abkhazia, where the climatic conditions and nature of the ground are favourable for farming, there is not a single agricultural school, and meanwhile, the mere dissemination of agricultural knowledge could get the Abkhazian out of his unenviable position and enable him to use the fruits of his native land. (Chanba 1982, 6)

According to Chanba (1982, 7), their "backwardness" was also reflected in their attitudes towards formal education:

Often you hear parents replying to the question: "Why don't you send your son to school?" – "I won't spoil him, just let him learn how to properly use a plow and a harrow," and so on. Obviously, this [...] view of schools is due to the fact that after completing two-grade schools, children have nowhere to complete their education. Outside Abkhazia, an Abkhazian peasant is unable to raise his son. True, there is a specialised school in Sukhum, [...] but it is not accessible to peasant children ....

While Chanba stresses the lack of self-awareness of "ordinary" Abkhaz people, his own writings are, in fact, a testament to a growing socio-political consciousness among at least the Abkhaz elites. Bgazhba and Lakoba (2007, 253) describe the early 20th century, and in particular the years between 1910 and 1917, as a period of the "revival of the Abkhaz". The opening of the exclusive highland school (*gorskaia shkola*) in Sukhum, in 1863, played an important role in the formation of an Abkhaz elite.[14] Among its most famous graduates was Dmitry Gulia (1874-1960), known as the founder of Abkhazian literature, who, together with Konstantin Machavariani, was responsible for the development of a new Abkhaz alphabet in 1892 and the publication of the first collection of Abkhaz poems.

Among the emerging Abkhaz intelligentsia were the revolutionaries Samson Kartozia, Nestor Lakoba and Efrem Eshba as well as democratically oriented writers such as Chanba, Simon Basaria and Mikhail Tarnava (Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007, 264). Concerned about the "backwardness" of the Abkhaz population, members of this new elite saw a need to modernise the Abkhaz way of life and used their publications as an appeal to "wake up". Despite their general pessimism, they detected some first signs of an "awakening" among the "masses". An example is Mikhail Tarnava's 1916 publication "Cultural Change in the Abkhazian life", in which he suggested that the Abkhaz were slowly emerging from their "state of

---

[14] This was a new school type invented by the Russian administration for the education of Caucasian highlanders (see Natolochnaya et al. 2018).

carelessness" due to the development of foreign trade on the territory, a new sense of competition among the Abkhazians, and an awareness of their cultural isolation and their powerlessness in the regulation of their social, cultural and legal affairs (Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007, 254). The same year, Samson Chanba published the article "On the Way to Consciousness", in which he (1982, 20) argued that Abkhazia was "beginning to gradually realise that it is now difficult to live the life of the 'old antiquity' and that it is necessary to begin to live a different life – a civilised (*kul'turnii*) one, because in the struggle for existence, it is now not force, not weapons, in the literal sense of the word (as it used to be in the ancient times), but a spiritual weapon that can help to get her [Abkhazia] out of her hopeless future."

The first decade of the 20th century thus corresponds to what Miroslav Hroch (1985) has defined as the first stage in the development of small nations, during which national consciousness is largely limited to intellectuals and hence far from a mass phenomenon. As Hroch (1985, 22–23) has argued, "[t]he beginning of every national revival is marked by a passionate concern on the part of a group of individuals, usually intellectuals, for the study of the language, the culture, the history of the oppressed nationality. [...] Their interest was motivated by a patriotism of the Enlightenment type, namely an active affection for the region in which they lived, associated with a thirst for knowledge of every new and insufficiently investigated phenomenon." This also seems to apply to Abkhazia, where, in the aftermath of the *makhadzhirstvo*, a number of intellectuals became increasingly interested in the "fate" of "their people".

2.3.   The collapse of the Russian Empire and the period of Menshevik rule

After the February Revolution in 1917 and the collapse of the Russian Empire, the representatives of the Sukhum district founded a new government body, the committee of public security. The same year, they joined the Union of the United Mountain People of the Caucasus (*Soiuz ob"edinennykh gortsev Kavkaza*), which had been founded earlier in May in Vladikavkaz by representatives of the various North Caucasian people, including the Circassians and Chechens. Abkhazia's first representative was Lykhny-born Semen Ashkhatsava, a member of the "Society of the spread of enlightenment among the Abkhazians" (*Obshchestvo rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia sredi abkhazov*), which had been established in 1910. In November

1917, the first Abkhazian People's Council (ANS) (*Abkhazskii Narodnyi Sovet*) was founded, which functioned as the local organ of the Union of the United Mountain People and was headed by Simon Basaria. The declaration of the ANS, which was jointly written by the Chechen Aslanbek Sheripv and the Abkhaz representatives, states:

> In the troubled times we are experiencing, when much is being destroyed to its foundations and much is being created anew, when radical change is affecting the conditions and state of life throughout Russia and, thus, Abkhazia, each people must keenly ensure that its rights and interests are not subjected to any encroachment and are not forgotten in the rebuilding of Russia on new principles. The Abkhazian people is convinced that its brethren, the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan, will support it in those circumstances when it is called upon to defend its rights. One of the main future problems for the Abkhazian National Council will be to work for the self-determination of the Abkhazian people. (quoted in Lakoba 1999, 89)

The same day as the ANS was founded, a Georgian delegation arrived in Sukhum, headed by the social democratic Akakii Chkhenkeli, with the aim of preventing the unification of Abkhazia with the north Caucasian Union of the United Mountain Peoples and to push for rapprochement with Georgia instead (Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007, 270). However, a large majority voted in favour of unification with the peoples of the North Caucasus, with the exception of representatives from Samurzakan, who threatened to separate from Abkhazia if it did not unite with Georgia. At that time, Georgia had become part of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

According to Welt (2014, 211), "the Abkhazian desire to join the North Caucasus was attenuated by the rise of Bolshevik power in Gudauta and the onset of the Russian civil war. Staunchly opposed to Bolshevism, the Abkhazian leadership acknowledged that Abkhazia was also linked to Transcaucasia, a safer harbour at the time than an incipient confederation in the North Caucasus." In February 1918, an Abkhaz delegation went to Tiflis (Tbilisi), where the national councils of Abkhazia and Georgia discussed future relations. Whereas the Abkhaz delegation made clear that it saw Abkhazia as an independent political entity and relations with Georgia as "neighbourly", the Georgian side wanted Abkhazia to be a part of a united Georgia, although "with full internal independence". Having failed to reach a compromise, the parties eventually signed a preliminary agreement on mutual relations in which

much remained unspecified (Welt 2014, 211). It consisted of three main points: the establishment of a single Abkhazia within the frontiers of the river Inguri to the river Mzymta near Adler; that the future construction of a united Abkhazia must be based on the principle of national self-determination and follow democratic principles; and finally, that plans to enter into treaty relations with other states must be discussed with the other party in advance (Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007, 272).

However, the same month, a group of Abkhaz Bolsheviks, who had formed a military revolutionary committee under the leadership of Efrem Ehsba, began to contest the power of the Abkhaz social democratic Mensheviks of the ANS. According to Welt (2014, 207), the Bolsheviks were a "potent force" in Abkhazia because – at a time when the struggle for land was a key issue – they "promised immediate relief from taxation and rapid redistribution of land." The peasant squad "kiaraz", which was founded at the end of 1917 in the Gudauta region and led by Nestor Lakoba, played an important role. In April 1918, the Bolsheviks managed to take control of Sukhumi and Samurzakan but failed to take over the Kodori region, which was ruled by local noblemen. The latter turned to the authorities of the TDFR to request their assistance against the Bolsheviks. Soon, Georgian troops were dispatched to Abkhazia, and "[a]fter a week of skirmishes, Georgian troops defeated the Bolsheviks and headed toward Sukhumi" (Welt 2014, 208). In May 1918, the TDFR was disbanded and the independent Georgian Democratic Republic was established under the rule of the social democratic Mensheviks. A few weeks later, another Bolshevik rebellion broke out in Gudauta but was soon defeated. Samurzakan remained under Bolshevik control until September 1918, when the Georgian Mensheviks finally managed to take control of the region (2014, 208).

In the beginning of Menshevik rule, the Abkhazian ANS "believed the new social democratic Georgian government would endorse an independent Abkhazia" (2014, 214). In June 1918, they even asked them for help to fight the Bolsheviks and remain in Sukhumi. "[D]esperate for protection and security", the ANS became increasingly willing to accept unification with Georgia and signed an agreement that made Abkhazia a *de facto* autonomous unit within Georgia, but without specifying the exact nature of this autonomy (2014, 214–15). In February 1919, a new ANS was elected. At least half of the winning social democrats "appear to have been Abkhazians" (2014, 217) ; in addition, there was a bloc of independents (six Abkhaz and one Russian) who supported maximum autonomy. The ANS's mission was to

come to an agreement regarding the nature of Abkhazia's autonomy, but continuously failed to reach a consensus. According to Welt (2014, 218), several Abkhaz Mensheviks defected to the independent bloc in support of greater decentralisation, which the centre was reluctant to grant. In December 1920, the Georgian government finally submitted a draft legislation on Abkhazia's autonomy. But this was "too little, too late" (2014, 219); in February 1921, the Red Army invaded Georgia to establish a Bolshevik government, thus bringing an end to Georgian Menshevik rule.

What is remembered as the annexation of democratic Georgia by the Soviet Union from the point of view of contemporary Georgia was experienced as the liberation from Georgian Mensheviks in Abkhazia, according to Abkhaz historiography and collective memory (Hewitt 2013, 39; see also Blauvelt 2007, 206). Abkhaz historians have described the period of Menshevik rule as a time of anarchy, robbery, theft and violence (e.g. Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007). Due to a lack of contemporaneous sources, it is difficult to assess this reading of history.[15] Among the available sources are the writings of the Bolshevik Efrem Eshba, published by the Abkhaz historian Igor Marykhuba (1997). Eshba (quoted in Marykhuba 1997, 297) described the cruelty with which Abkhaz were treated by the Mensheviks, who persecuted many revolutionaries and repressed ordinary peasants:

> They showed special severity towards the Abkhaz. In the course of their three-year rule, the Mensheviks, as a nationalist, petty bourgeois party truly carried out a policy of repression of the Abkhaz (mainly against the peasants – with the princes they reached an understanding), and seriously poisoned the atmosphere. They burned some peasant houses, killed some peasant lads, put some innocents in prison, especially from the Abkhaz intelligentsia, and so forth.

According to Eshba, the situation before and after Menshevik rule could not have been more different. Before, the conflict was mostly a cross-ethnic, class-based struggle between the peasantry and the "bourgeoisie":

> In Abkhazia in these first months of 1918 there was a purely open social, class struggle of the entire peasantry (of all nationalities) under the leadership of the workers of Sukhum and the workers of the Black Sea railway, under the leadership of our Bolshevik organisation, against the princes, the old administration and the merchants, for land and for

---

[15] All documentation of the period of the Menshevik rule in Abkhazia was destroyed when the State Archive of Abkhazia was set on fire in October 1992 (Voronov, Florenskii, and Shutova 1993).

power…Together we fought a shared enemy. On both sides were united various nationalities. I remember that during the 40-day existence of Soviet power in Abkhazia, power resting on the armed force of the entire multinational peasantry, nobody raised the question, it wasn't relevant, nobody even had the thought to oppose Abkhazia to Georgia. (quoted in Marykhuba 1997, 296)

But when he returned to Abkhazia in 1921, he witnessed an unprecedented hostility vis-à-vis Georgians, as he told Abkhaz students at a public lecture in Moscow in 1925. Within a few years, for many, the revolutionary struggle had turned into a struggle against Georgian domination:

Three years passed, and in 1921 those comrades who had unwillingly been outside of the Transcaucasus and Abkhazia saw with surprise that in such a short period a colossal transformation had taken place in the situation in Abkhazia, in this inter-weaving of nationalities. We found a picture exactly the opposite of that in 1918… We saw that the Abkhaz peasantry rejected everything 'Georgian.' The Mensheviks drilled into their heads the idea that to live politically together with Georgia meant to be oppressed by them. This was an enormous obstacle when it came time to begin constructing Soviet power in Abkhazia. (quoted in Marykhuba 1997, 312)

Given the limited availability of sources from this period, it is difficult to verify these accounts. Abkhaz historians certainly tend to downplay ideological and strategic divisions among the Abkhaz, especially between Bolshevik supporters and those of a social democratic orientation, and instead focus on Menshevik oppression. As Blauvelt (2014, 40) has pointed out, "[c]ertainly not even all of the ethnic Abkhaz welcomed Soviet power, especially those whose previous class or political associations (aristocrats, merchants, former Mensheviks or members of other parties) made it difficult or impossible for them to flourish in the new conditions." In that sense, the Abkhaz were most likely not the unified, anti-Menshevik bloc that Abkhaz historians like to envision. According to Welt (2014, 206), at the time "expressions of Abkhazian […] ethnonationalism were heterogeneous and not all dedicated to complete territorial independence. Abkhazian […] nationalists who did not support the Bolsheviks were prepared to accept a middle ground. They did not welcome Georgian independence, or separation from Russia. […] In these circumstances, they rejected conflict and accepted unification with independent Georgia." Nevertheless, what seemed to have united all Abkhaz regardless of their ideological orientation was the idea of Abkhaz self-determination. Therefore, while

it is impossible to reconstruct the experience of ordinary people on the ground, the existing material suggests that ethnicity became an increasingly relevant *political* category.

2.4.   The establishment of Soviet power: Nestor Lakoba's Soviet princedom

On 26 March 1921, Abkhazia's Revolutionary Committee informed Lenin and Stalin of their intention to declare Abkhazia a Soviet Socialist Republic and on 31 March 1921, the new Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Abkhazia was announced (Hewitt 2013, 39–40). It was in particular Efrem Eshba who convinced the communist leadership that a subordination of Abkhazia to Georgia was not feasible in the aftermath of Menshevik repressions and that union status was the best strategy to re-establish trust towards the Georgian leadership (Blauvelt 2014, 29). Moscow and Tbilisi reluctantly agreed on the condition that this would only be a temporary arrangement and Abkhazia eventually would be integrated into Georgia. In August 1921, Orjonikidze (quoted in Blauvelt 2014b, 30), the leader of the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia, countered the first allegations of "Abkhaz separatism": "Let Abkhazia be independent, let her heal the wounds she received from the Mensheviks, but in the longer term the Abkhaz themselves will be convinced of the necessity of joining closely with the Soviet neighbour, Georgia." In December 1921, the Abkhazian and Georgian SSRs signed a special union treaty to establish a military, political and financial-economic union and Abkhazia was subsequently referred to as a "treaty republic". In February 1922, when the treaty was officially approved, Abkhazia joined the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) through Georgia (Blauvelt 2014, 30).

As outlined in the introduction, at the heart of early Soviet nationality policy was the principle of indigenisation (*korenizatsiia*), which sought to make Soviet power native and comprehensible and thus involved the promotion of national languages and elites. This meant that the Abkhaz, who could claim indigeneity, were to be given special rights within the republic. In addition, the Abkhaz – unlike Georgians, Armenians and Russians – were classified as a "culturally backwards" people, which was another justification for receiving special treatment within the Soviet system (Martin 2001, 23). At that time, the Abkhaz had a literacy rate (in Russian) of 11.2 percent and less than 5 percent were literate in the Abkhaz

language. The overwhelming majority (96.3 percent) lived in rural areas, where they pursued subsistence agriculture (Blauvelt 2014a, 235). Writer Konstantin Paustovsky (1969, 20–21), who lived in Sukhumi in the early 1920s, described the (patriarchal) Abkhaz lifestyle as follows:

> Most of the men were lean, speaking in guttural voices, somewhat reminiscent of an eagle's cry. They almost never came down from their saddles. Their horses, as lean as the men, pawed the ground. [...] The men were distinguished by their pride, their hot tempers, their unimpeachable honesty, but they were sullen and had slow, leisurely movements. All work was done by women. By the time the women reached thirty they looked like old hags. I often met women on the road from the mountain villages to Sukhum. They dragged themselves along, bent double and scarcely able to breathe under the weight of sacks of maize or bundles of brush wood. And in front of them, hand on hip, would ride the men on their glossy steeds – the husbands and sometimes the sons or even grandsons of these women.

To boost the development of the Abkhaz, most leadership positions were given to ethnic Abkhazians. The central figure was Nestor Lakoba, who took over the leadership after Eshba was appointed to the Georgian Central Committee (Blauvelt 2014b, 30–37). However, like in other republics, there was a "national 'hole in the middle'" (Martin 2001, 377) due to a lack of qualified Abkhaz and, as a consequence, the majority of technical and administrative positions were filled by Russians. But in contrast to other republics, instead of a confrontation between Russians and the titular nationality, there was a "tactical alliance between the titular Abkhazian elite and the Russian middle-level bureaucracy against the political and cultural influence of Georgians" (Blauvelt 2014a, 256). This alliance was furthered by the predominance of the Russian language. Since linguistic indigenisation was not a priority for the Abkhaz elites, who had been educated in Russian and often lacked proficiency in Abkhaz, Russian continued to be the main administrative language, and, in 1925, was even made Abkhazia's official state language.

But the unwillingness to grant official status to local languages also limited the usage of Georgian, which soon provoked lengthy discussions about how linguistic *korenizatsiia* should be best implemented in Abkhazia's multinational context (Blauvelt 2014a, 239–43). To investigate the situation on the ground, a commission was sent to Abkhazia, which produced a crushing report: "It can be said without exaggeration that the Abkhazia of 1925 is not a Soviet Socialist Republic at all, but rather a case of oligarchic rule over Georgians by ethnic Abkhazians who have

as their goal not the Sovietization or socialization of the whole social-political tenor of life, [but] an 'Abkhazification' of the country by giving all possible privileges to ethnically Abkhazian citizens" (quoted in Blauvelt 2014a, 243). Complaints were also made about Lakoba's leadership style, who was accused of having monopolised all power (2014a, 244). Rather than working towards the construction of a socialist society, Lakoba allegedly created a "Soviet princedom" in which differences between peasants were downplayed and former nobles and landowners were treated too leniently (Blauvelt 2012, 84). This is also reflected in Paustovksy's autobiography (1969, 21), in which he noted the peaceful existence of the former feudal prince Shervashidze, with whom "[n]o one interfered [...], probably because the old prince had long ago become a drunken sot and was in his dotage. He lived in a small house in the outskirts of Sukhum. During the first Soviet autumn some peasants, out of sheer habit, brought him their feudal dues – maize, tobacco, goat's cheese and damson plums."

Even though Abkhaz peasants had helped the Bolshevik movement, their support was mainly motivated by promises for land redistribution and some form of autonomy rather than Bolshevist ideology per se. According to Blauvelt (2012, 104), the Abkhaz peasants' understanding of the Soviet state was thus "parochial": "They had sworn the oath to fight together in Kiaraz only ten years before, a part of the life experience of many of the skhod participants, and they had done so not in the name of Bolshevism per se, but of Kiaraz and Abkhazian national identity (or at the very least of their local community identity) and for Bolshevik promises of some form of autonomous status in a Soviet state." Lakoba paid great attention to his support basis: As a journalist wrote in 1924, "[t]o Nestor, as the peasants simply call him one on one, they come with any little thing, bypassing all official channels, in certainty that he will hear them out and make a decision" (quoted in Blauvelt 2007, 207). Most importantly, referring to Abkhazia's official "backwardness", particularly in the area of agriculture, he successfully stalled the implementation of collectivisation, which many peasants saw as a threat to their customs, or "Abkhazian conscience" (*abkhazskaia sovest'*), as one peasant agitator put it (Blauvelt 2012, 87).

This further proved the privileged status of the Abkhaz during the 1920s and 1930s, which was linked to Lakoba's close ties to Orjonikize, with whom he had worked in the Bolshevik underground movement. He was also in frequent contact with Stalin, who regularly visited Abkhazia. Already in the 1920s, large investments

were made in the resort infrastructure along the coast, which in the 1930s culminated in the large-scale transformation of the Black Sea coastline from a "backward and undeveloped malarial region" into a "salubrious, subtropical landscape" (Conterio 2015, 92), consisting of citrus and tobacco plantations on the hills and sanatoria along the coast.[16] Several government dachas were located in Abkhazia as well as in nearby Sochi, which provided members of the local elite easy access to high-level officials, including Stalin himself.

Figure 4. Map of the Abkhazian SSR. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

2.5. Abkhazia under Beria: from "Abkhazianisation" to "Georgification"

Between 1935 and 1936, Stalin met several times with Lakoba, whom he wanted to transfer to the centre in Moscow. However, after continuously rejecting the offer, Lakoba finally fell out of favour with Stalin in the second half of 1936 and was soon declared an "enemy of the people". He died one year later under suspicious circumstances during a visit to his long-standing rival Lavrenti Beria in Tbilisi

---

[16] The first sanatoria, such as in Gagra, were built in the late 19th century under the supervision of Prince Oldenburg and other members of the Russian royalty.

(Blauvelt 2007, 216; Lakoba 1999, 123). In 1937, many members of his support network were charged in show trials and later executed. Other members of the Abkhazian elite left for Russia (Clogg 1995, 173–74). For Beria, who was a Mingrelian born in the Abkhazian village of Merkheuli and at that time First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, this was an opportunity to destroy Lakoba's network in Abkhazia and replace the majority of important positions with loyal Georgians, most of them Mingrelians (Blauvelt 2007, 217).

The 1930s hence marked a shift in nationality policy towards the larger titular nationality of Georgians, a process that came to be known as "Georgification". Beginning with the subordination of Abkhazia as an Autonomous Republic (ASSR) to the Georgian Union Republic in 1931, it involved several different strategies, including the promotion of Georgian cadres and Georgian as the dominant language, the renaming or adjustment of toponyms, and the intensified resettlement of Georgians (mostly Mingrelians) from western Georgia to Abkhazia.[17] Between 1939 and 1943, the percentage of Georgians admitted to the Abkhazian Party organisation rose significantly, peaking at 50.8 percent in 1941, compared with 20.6 percent Abkhazians and 10.9 percent Russians (Blauvelt 2007, 218). After Sukhum was renamed Sukhumi (with the Georgian "i" at the end) in 1936, the process of changing toponyms intensified from 1947 onwards, when a special "Commission for the Transcription of Toponyms for Populated Areas" was created. As a result, more than 150 places as well as streets, squares, train stations and platforms and schools were renamed (Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 12). In 1938, the Abkhaz alphabet was changed from a Latin to a Georgian base and in 1944, Georgian was introduced as the main language of instruction in Abkhaz schools.

In official documents, it was argued that the transfer to Georgian would significantly stimulate the development of the culture of the Abkhaz people and improve the quality of education more generally (Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 12). But in fact, it seems to have achieved the opposite. As the Abkhaz teacher Georgii Bzhania (2005, 23), who worked as head of the Tamysh middle school for several decades, remembers in his memoirs:

> The transfer of the Abkhazian schools in the years of 1945-1946 to Georgian as the language of instruction led to a great failure not only in the academic, but also in the pedagogical work of all Abkhazian schools.

[17] For a detailed discussion of Abkhazia's subordination to Georgia, see Blauvelt (2007, 209–2010).

> We remember the massive dropout of students, missed lessons, the decline of school discipline. Sometimes teachers did not work in their subject area and knew little about the teaching methods in secondary school. In the first year of the transfer of the Abkhazian schools to Georgian, more than 80 students did not go to school.

Parents and students were resistant to study in a language that they did not know. KGB documents from the time attest to the large-scale outrage among ethnic Abkhazians. For instance, a people's judge from the Gudauta region was reported to have said during a meeting that "[t]his introduction of teaching in Georgian is absurd. This method can in no way be justified. After all, to teach in an incomprehensible language is an anti-educational approach. This will only serve as an assault on children..." (quoted in Clogg 1995, 173). The reform also seemed to further deteriorate the attitude of Abkhaz peasants towards formal education. There were doubts that Georgian was of any use for their children and many decided to let them work at home instead. For instance, according to a KGB report, "[t]he collective farm worker Keskin ADLEIBA, from Merkula village in the Ochamchira region, won't let his two sons attend school. He sent one of them to work in the tea factory, and one of them to work as a shepherd, saying there was no point in teaching them Georgian" (quoted in Clogg 1995, 173). Rather than stimulating Abkhaz cultural development, in the short run the reform only strengthened their "backwardness" and further widened the socio-economic divide within Abkhazia.

In addition to cultural and educational policies aimed at minority populations, a large-scale resettlement programme of kolkhoz workers from mostly western Georgia (Mingrelia) was initiated in 1937 and lasted until the mid-1950s. Between 1939 and 1959, official census data shows an increase in the Georgian population of 66,000, outnumbering the ethnic Abkhazian population by 97,000 (Müller 1999, 236–37). In the earlier stages of resettlement, workers were settled to the outskirts of Abkhaz villages, where they were provided with houses, whereas later they were increasingly moved into the centre. Geographically, the programme was centred on the Gudauta and Ochamchira region (Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 11). The official justification was to repopulate the large amount of free land in Abkhazia. But according to Abkhaz historians, this was a myth to attract potential settlers. In fact, there were even cases of people who tried to escape because they were assigned land that was not suitable for agriculture (1992, 9). This suggests that

the programme was not entirely voluntary, as officially claimed, but part of the larger process of forced collectivisation (Blauvelt 2007, 218).

Conceptually, "Georgification" has been regarded as part of a Soviet-wide shift towards a policy of national consolidation. According to Oleg Khlevniuk (2015, 16), the idea of national consolidation is best understood as a pyramid of assimilation, where "[a]t its top, the major ethnicities 'coalesced' into a unified 'Soviet people,' led by the 'elder brother,' the Russian people", whereas "[a]t the base of the pyramid the ethnic minorities were assimilated into the titular nations of one or another republic". Blauvelt (2014a, 257), in contrast, argues that Georgification was "a diminution of the status of the Abkhazians, but no serious attempt at incorporation of the Abkhazians into a larger group". This is supported by the fact that while Beria pushed to incorporate the Muslim Acharians into the Georgian ethnic category in the 1939 census, the Abkhaz remained a distinct ethnic category in the reduced list of nationalities. In Blauvelt's view (2014a, 257),

> [p]erhaps a more appropriate explanation for the fate of *korenizatsiia* in Abkhazia and the movement toward repression—even deportation—of the Abkhazians, lies in the relationship between ethnic cleansing and the Soviet view of "enemy nations." By the 1930s, the Abkhazians were viewed by the central authorities as a diaspora nationality, with large numbers of their ethnic kin living in Turkey involved in conflicts over status and territory with the Georgians, and by implication, with the Soviet state. The Abkhazians, like other diaspora nationalities, were seen as potentially disloyal.

Regardless of the specific intentions behind the repressions under Beria and Stalin, they, in combination with earlier events, seemed to have instilled or amplified a fear of extinction through Georgian cultural domination among certain Abkhaz. In 1947, three members of the Abkhaz intelligentsia – Georgii Dzidzaria, Bagrat Shinkuba and Konstantin Shakryl – sent a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in which they drew attention to the recent policy changes and expressed their concerns. The letter opens with the following lines:

> The Soviet power and the Party of Lenin saved the Abkhaz people from complete physical extinction, to which it was actually doomed under the conditions of the damned old system. Thanks to the wise Lenin-Stalin national policy, the workers of Abkhazia firmly embarked on the path of rapid and comprehensive development, and in 26 Soviet years achieved brilliant successes. However, lately in Abkhazia, unfortunately, such a situation has arisen that fundamentally contradicts and distorts the

national policy of our Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government. (quoted in Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 531)

The authors then continue with a long list of grievances, beginning with the reform of Abkhaz schools, as a consequence of which many Abkhaz schools were closed, particularly in the cities, and many Abkhaz teachers were fired and replaced with teachers from western Georgia. They also complain about the closure of the only radio programme in Abkhaz and the reduction of Abkhaz newspaper publications. Regarding the changing of toponyms, they criticise "that the Abkhazian geographical names destroyed by Russian tsarism [...] are not restored, even when it is possible, and the introduced Russian names are replaced only by Georgian ones" (1992, 535). Furthermore, they bemoan the lack of Abkhaz cadres in official state structure and the impact of growing immigration from western Georgia. According to the authors (Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 533),

> [r]ecently ten settlements have been built in Abkhazia for migrants from the regions of Georgia. Construction of immigrant settlements continues. These villages are being built mainly in the Abkhazian districts – Ochamchira and Gudauta, as well as in the Gagra district. [...] Very often such resettlement villages encroach on villages with a compact Abkhazian population. Naturally, in these cases the ethnographic integrity of the Abkhazian population will be quickly violated.

Finally, they criticise the fact that from 1940 onwards, the very term "Abkhaz people" disappeared from official usage and that it became increasingly impossible to print anything about the history or language of the Abkhazians (Sagaria, Achugba, and Pachulia 1992, 536).

Although the authors were punished for disinformation and criticised for "bourgeois nationalism", according to Blauvelt (2007, 221) "the letter is important as the first clear statement of Abkhaz national grievance since the fall of Lakoba, and set the pattern for future such appeals by Abkhaz intellectuals directly to Moscow, bypassing the Georgian Party hierarchy." It was the death of Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent arrest of Beria that finally provided an opportunity for ethnic Abkhazians to voice their grievances more openly at the centre in Moscow. In August 1953, a large group of officials was sent to Georgia by the CPSU Central Committee in order to investigate the situation in educational institutions. The commission encountered widespread discontent, including striking Abkhaz students who demanded instruction in the Russian language and, as a consequence, recommended

the immediate reintroduction of Russian classes and the changing of the Abkhaz alphabet to the Cyrillic script.

Despite resistance from the Georgian leadership, these reforms were quickly implemented. There were also attempts to replace some of the existing, Georgian-dominated cadres with members of the "local" ethnicities, including Abkhaz, Russians and Armenians (Khlevniuk 2015, 22–24). Yet, while many of the "anti-Abkhaz" policies were undone in the period after Stalin's death – for example, Abkhaz schools were re-opened, a revised Cyrillic alphabet was introduced and publishing and broadcasting in Abkhaz was relaunched (Hewitt 2013, 48) –, the ethnic composition of the population had irreversibly changed in favour of ethnic Georgians, with the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia rising from 67,494 in 1926 to 158,221 in 1959, compared to only a slight shift in the number of Abkhazians from 55,918 in 1926 to 61,197 in 1959 (cf. Müller 1999).

2.6.   Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to decentre ethnicity and to trace the evolution of "the Abkhaz" from antiquity until the first decades of Soviet rule. It first explored the political and social developments from a variety of linguistically and culturally affiliated tribes into a single, though still inchoate, ethnic formation – rather than a "group" in a modern sense – under the Abkhaz king Leon II at the end of the 8th century. It then showed that even though the Abkhaz were culturally and linguistically tightly linked to the various Circassian tribes of the north Caucasus, there was a close political association with (what is today) Georgia from the early 11th century, when it became part of the Kingdom of Abkhazia and Georgia. The existing sources suggest that no particular antagonism existed between local Abkhaz and Georgian monarchs at that time.

Between the 16th and the 20th century, Abkhazia came under the influence of two major empires, first the Ottoman and then the Russian. Here, we see the evolution of an ambivalent relationship with Russia, which takes on the role of both protector and threat (something that we can still observe today). Revolts against Russian imperial rule led to the forced migration of a large part of the Abkhaz (and related) population to Ottoman Turkey, as a consequence of which Abkhaz became a minority in their place of origin. However, as the abandoned land became

increasingly resettled with Georgians (Mingrelians), it is Georgia and the Georgians, and not Russia, which eventually came to be seen as a threat to the existence of the Abkhaz people. Hence, the notion of the "Georgian threat" is something that only gradually evolved following the forced exile to the Ottoman Empire – an event that dramatically altered the human geography through complex processes of de- and repopulation. This is not to suggest that Abkhazia was ethnically homogenous before, but to stress the unprecedented extent of (forced) movement of people and its long-term effects on local communities.[18]

Yet, a detailed study of the developments after the demise of the Russian Empire and during the establishment of early Soviet power reveals that even though the Abkhaz, regardless of their political orientation (Mensheviks and Bolsheviks), pursued autonomy, this was not necessarily tantamount to independent statehood. And despite the repressions under the Georgian Mensheviks, the first decade of Soviet rule also attests to close – at least political – relationships between Abkhaz and Georgians. At the same time, the republican status granted to Abkhazia during the first Soviet decade entrenched some idea of independence (within the confines of the Soviet Union) that would later be used as a reference point. Abkhaz-Georgian relations significantly deteriorated after the death of the beloved Abkhaz leader Nestor Lakoba and the repressions initiated by Beria. This attempt to replace Russian with Georgian hegemony nourished a fear of ethnic extinction through Georgian domination among certain Abkhaz.

The chapter thus demonstrates that in order to understand the "roots" of the conflict, we need to look beyond the Soviet period and take earlier colonial encounters into account. As Horowitz (1985) has pointed out, colonial policies tend to create an environment conducive to group comparison. This was also the case in Abkhazia, where imperial authorities punished the remaining Abkhaz by declaring them a "guilty nation", which exacerbated an existing urban-rural divide and further disadvantaged them socio-economically vis-à-vis other groups residing in Abkhazia, many of which "helped to build up the Abkhazian urban economy and to rid the countryside of malarial swamps during the 19th century" (Colarusso 1995, 78). At the same time, the late 19th century and early 20th century also witnessed the

---

[18] According to John Colarusso (1995, 78), "Abkhazia seems always to have been multi-ethnic to some extent. The Greeks of Abkhazia are of ancient pedigree, perhaps descended from the city inhabitants of Classical times. The Armenians, Cossacks, and Turks were relatively old immigrants, as were some of the Mingrelians, Russians, Ukrainians, and Estonians."

development of the Abkhaz language and literature and the emergence of a small Abkhaz elite that became increasingly concerned with the fate of "their people", thus laying the foundation for the development of a (future) national movement.

And yet, there are few traces of severe "ethnic antagonism", at least politically speaking, up until the 1930s. Consequently, understanding the historical "roots" of a conflict does not mean that conflict was endemic to society at the time. Of course, it is difficult to know what was going on at the micro level. Available sources suggest that "class" differences and local/regional differences were the key cleavages that organised social and political relations. What "inter-ethnic" relations looked like on the ground, at least in the Soviet period, will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3.　Lived Internationalism: Conflict and Co-existence in Soviet Abkhazia

I began the previous chapter by describing my first meeting with Daur, the history professor. As I mentioned, our encounter took the form of a lecture that went far back in history. But this was not the last time that Daur and I sat down to discuss any questions I had; in fact, over time, he became one of my regular interlocutors. The better I got to know Daur, the more I learned about his own personal history and experience of growing up in Soviet Abkhazia. When he talked about his youth, his eyes were usually glowing. He loved to tell anecdotes about life in Soviet Sukhumi, which was a place and time when, he insisted, *ethnicity did not matter*.

This stands in stark contrast to the literature on Soviet nationalities that tends to approach nationalism as a bottom-up force grounded in the primacy of ethnic identity and dismisses internationalism as a top-down ideology (e.g. Brubaker 1996; Martin 2001; Suny 2014). One can of course dismiss Daur's stories as "nostalgic", as distorted memories of a time that never existed, as it is often done. But listening to similar stories over and over, I kept thinking that looking at them through the lens of nostalgia alone risked missing something important about a period that has rarely received much attention in the literature on nationalism and national identity: the relatively "ordinary" or "peaceful" times after Stalin's death, when socialism and Soviet rule became increasingly normalised.

Daur's recollections also stand in contrast to the literature on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which tends to treat this period as a "prelude" to the outbreak of mass violence in 1992. Unlike this literature, which usually adopts a rather eventful approach, concentrating on the political tensions that erupted every ten years as if they were representative of Georgian-Abkhaz "relations" as a whole, I want to approach this period as a phenomenon worth looking at on its own. To do so, I explore the following questions: how was ethnicity experienced in everyday life? What were the main social configurations? To what extent did the protests on the political level reflect social relations on the ground?

In contrast to the existing literature, which has stressed the ethnic antagonism fostered by Soviet nationality policy and has portrayed Georgian-Abkhaz relations as increasingly antagonistic, I provide a more nuanced picture, shifting the focus from the conditions of conflict to the conditions of peace. Based on my material, I

argue that although there were tensions, a cross-ethnic, "international" community nevertheless existed in Abkhazia. Rather than adopting a zero-sum perspective, I suggest that there was, in fact, both conflict and harmony.

3.1.　Repopulation and ethnic prejudice: Fazil Iskander's *Sandro of Chegem*

In the previous chapter, I investigated the dynamics of de- and re-population from a general point of view and, to some extent, zoomed in on the experience of those who arrived from other parts of the Russian Empire but struggled to accommodate to the local climate, thus paving the way for growing immigration from neighbouring Mingrelia. In this section, I want to shift the focus to the experience of the remaining Abkhaz. How did they receive the newcomers? Existing sources suggest that ethnic Abkhazians were not necessarily hostile towards the Mingrelian settlers. For example, in her study of war mobilisation in Abkhazia, Anastasia Shesterinina (2014, 99) finds that especially in the earlier phases of Georgian resettlement, "the Abkhaz are said to have accepted these families in line with the intra-Abkhaz norms of reciprocity." One of her interviewees remembered that "[w]hen land was taken away from the locals and given to Georgian [settlers], locals shared last piece (sic) of mamalyga [traditional food], helped them in every way, [for] they had to grow roots. The Abkhaz understood that Georgians were forcefully resettled" (2014, 99). Similarly, George Hewitt (1993, 281) notes that "Abkhazians recall truck-loads of these, often unwilling, immigrants being dumped with nowhere to live and thus having to be given temporary refuge by the locals themselves."

To gain a deeper understanding of the social dynamics on the ground, it is worth taking a look at the work of the Abkhazian author Fazil Iskander. Iskander was born in Sukhumi in 1929 and spent his childhood summers in the village of Dzhgerda in the Ochamchira district, an experience that served as the main inspiration for his novel *Sandro of Chegem*, which he (1983, vii) describes as "[t]he history of a clan, the history of the village of Chegem, the history of Abkhazia, and all the rest of the world as it is seen from Chegemian heights." More specifically, it humorously portrays the deep-seated pride among the villagers and their prejudice towards outsiders. As Iskander (1983, vii–viii) explains, "[e]very people perceives its own way of life as the greatest one of all. This perception seems to reflect a nation's instinct of self-preservation: Why should I imitate another people's way of life if mine is the

greatest? Hence ethnic prejudice; it is inevitable, for the time being. To pretend that it did not exist would be cowardly and vulgar."

As Goldie Blankoff-Scarr (1988, 46) has argued, the fictional village of Chegem "is a symbol of all nations, great and especially small, who see the structure and substance of their traditional ways of life, generators and protectors of their value systems, disintegrating, undermined by the demands of a technological society". While the book depicts a variety of threats, including policemen, city dwellers and communists, or simply any kind of "outsider" (even from a different village), one prejudice stands out in particular, namely that vis-à-vis the so-called "Endurskies"[19]. The Endurskies, who are from the fictitious district of Enduria in the very east of Abkhazia (corresponding to today's Gali district), are the very "mystery of ethnic prejudice" (1983, vii). In "The Tale of the Old Khabug's Mule" we learn that

> [t]he Abkhazians have a very complicated attitude toward the Endurskies. *The main thing is that no one knows exactly how they got to Abkhazia, but everyone is sure that they're here to gradually destroy the Abkhazians*. At first the hypothesis was advanced that the Turks were sending them down on the Abkhazians. […] The Chegemians put forward a different version of the story. Their version was that somewhere deep in the dense forest between Georgia and Abkhazia, the Endurskies had been spontaneously generated from wood mould. Very likely that was possible in czarist times. And later they grew into a whole tribe, multiplying much faster than the Abkhazians would have liked. Several very old Chegemians say they remember a time when Endurskies did not live in Abkhazia, merely showed up occasionally in small bands, hiring themselves out to Abkhazians to build a house or hoe a field. "That's when they sized up where, how, and what we had," the younger Chegemians replied. "And you thought they were just hoeing the field." (Iskander 1983, 215–16)

Despite their apparently fictitious character, as Neal Ascherson (2011, 232) has noted, "nobody in Abkhazia has any doubt about who is meant". What Iskander alludes to is the deep-seated suspicion with which the resettlement of the Mingrelians was perceived among Abkhaz and, in particular, the suspicion that they were a direct, if not explicit, threat to their existence. This fostered a mechanism of scapegoating: as soon as something bad would happen within the village, Mingrelian neighbours would be under immediate suspicion, as the following excerpt from "Tali, Miracle of Chegem" illustrates:

---

[19] The term "Endursky" is based on the Russian root "dur" for stupid (Blankoff-Scarr 1988, 40).

> The several Endurian families who had lived in Chegem from time immemorial were kept under constant secret surveillance by the Chegemians. When there were alarming rumors or elemental catastrophes, the Chegemians invariably turned their gaze to the Endurskies in order to ascertain their position on that matter.
>
> "I wonder what They're saying?" they would ask one another in such cases. Any response from the Endurskies was perceived as a crafty, but also a stupid, attempt to conceal their true, allegedly most often malicious, attitude toward everything that alarmed the Chegemians.
>
> None of this prevented them from maintaining quite friendly relations with their Endursky aliens in normal times, but in a difficult moment the Chegemians would begin to suspect the Endurskies of secret intrigues.
>
> Let's say it's summer, there's a drought. One of the local Endurskies walks past a cornfield where a Chegemian is hoeing.
>
> "What do you say, countryman," calls the man hoeing the corn, "it is going to rain?"
>
> "Who knows" the Endursky replies, shooting a glance at the sky, and he goes his way. The Chegemian takes up his hoe again and works in silence for a while. Suddenly he grins and says to himself – from which it follows that he has been tensely mulling over the Endursky's reply the whole time – "Who knows," he says, repeating the Endursky's reply with a sort of meek irony. "May God grant us as much good in life as there is evil in what you hide from us…" (Iskander 1983, 310)

Peter Glick (2002, 114–15) has defined scapegoating as an "envious prejudice [...] directed at groups perceived to have dangerous abilities and evil intentions". This resonates with Iskander's description of the Endurskies: even though the Abkhaz look down on them as originating from "wood mould", regarding them as "parasitic" and thus culturally inferior[20], they also perceive them as having the advantage of reproducing themselves fast, which, in turn, gives them the power to realise their "evil intention" of taking over Abkhazia; an intention that they do not openly reveal due to their "devilish guile".[21]

Iskander's stories thus provide a glimpse into how the Mingrelians, who made up a large part of Abkhazia's Georgian population, became cast as cunning and therefore potentially untrustworthy. While scapegoating is a mechanism that can be found across the world, in the case of Abkhazia it appears to have been amplified by pervasive magical or superstitious beliefs. As anthropologist Michael Costello (2015, 179) has noted in his study of the relationship between Abkhaz custom and state law, "[t]here is a widespread belief that few events are the operation of chance – there is

---

[20] Glick (2002, 134) also notes that paradoxically, potential scapegoats can be cast as inferior as a strategy to maintain a positive self-image of the group.

[21] During my fieldwork, they were often described to me as "cunning like a fox" (the slur for Mingrelians in Abkhaz is "fox tail").

human or supernatural agency in all maters (sic)." The practice of scapegoating therefore has to be understood against the background of a wider "occult cosmology", i.e. a system "of belief in a world animated by secret, mysterious, and/or unseen powers" based on the idea that "there is more to what happens in the world than meets the eye—that reality is anything but 'transparent'" (Sanders and West 2003, 6).

Consequently, for the Abkhaz, mistrust was not an exception but the rule; it was the default mode of looking at one's surroundings. Nevertheless, it became increasingly channelled towards the Mingrelians. This is well captured in Iskander's story "The Tale of the Old Khabug's Mule", which is narrated from the perspective of an Abkhaz-owned mule. One day, the mule encounters a young boy, who is the grandson of an Abkhaz of African descent.[22] He instantly notices that the boy's skin colour is black even though his mother is a "white Abkhazian", which he takes as evidence for the "weakening" of Abkhaz "blood". Deeply concerned, he thinks: "If Abkhazian blood gets any weaker, the Endurskies will take over completely" and then pauses: "But what do the Endurskies have to do with it, I thought suddenly. I sensed that *I had been infected by our Abkhazians, and I was ready to dump the blame for all our misfortunes on the Endurskies*" (1983, 249 emphasis added). Here, Iskander humorously captures how the threat of ethnic extinction of the Abkhaz and the presence of the Endurskies became habitually linked to an extent that a causal connection was no longer necessary.

3.2.   (Relatively) ordinary times: the friendship of peoples from below

The "ethnic prejudice" that Iskander describes is persistent and deep-seated, and yet, it did not define social relations. For as he writes in "Tali, Miracle of Chegem", "[n]one of this prevented them from maintaining quite friendly relations with their Endursky aliens in normal times" (1983, 310). As the following interview excerpts illustrate, many people today do indeed remember relations between different nationalities as "friendly" (*druzhno*). In fact, it is often highlighted that *nationality did not matter*, i.e. that it was not a category that significantly structured social contacts:

---

[22] In the 17th century, a small Abkhaz-speaking African community emerged due to the flourishing of slave trade (see Labadze 2015).

Where we lived in Ochamchira, Abkhaz and Mingrelians lived together, were good neighbours, were always friends, that's why the majority knew both languages and also Russian. I remember for sure that there was no national question at that time, so that someone would say: "you are Abkhaz" or "you are Georgian". (Dzhul'etta) (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 5)

I studied at a Russian school [village of Tamish, Ochamchira district]. In my class there were Abkhazians, Georgians, and Russians. In our neighbourhood lived mostly Abkhazians and Georgians. We all lived together in harmony. (Tat'iana) (2006, 32)

On our street lived both Abkhaz and Georgians, they all spoke Mingrelian. The Abkhaz could also speak Mingrelian. In good and bad times, we all were together, lived peacefully: Abkhaz, Georgians, Russians, Turks [...]. (Lamara) (2006, 40)

We lived harmoniously, nobody distinguished others by nationality. We lived with our neighbours like one family, helped each other in good and bad times. (Nato) (2006, 71)

We generally never thought about nationality until that war. I simply knew that I was Georgian. [...] The question of nationality did not exist for us: Georgians, Abkhaz, Armenians – we all grew up together. Where we lived in Mokva, we did not think about who belonged to which nation. (Nino) (2006, 131)

Both in the villages and the city social contact between Abkhaz and Georgians was significantly fostered through neighbourhood networks. Characterised by strong norms of reciprocity and mutual help, neighbourhood communities have always been a fundamental unit of social relations among the Abkhaz and in the Caucasus more widely; as Irina Molodikova and Alan Watt (2007, 122) have noted, "neighbours, according to Caucasus traditions, are closer than relatives who live far away". While traditionally, neighbourhoods tended to overlap with the extended kinship network or "familias", in Soviet times the Abkhaz tradition of neighbourly solidarity was increasingly extended "to those who were resettled to rural areas of Abkhazia for permanent residence" (Krylov 2001, 83).[23] There was a strong communal spirit and it was common for residents, and in particular immediate neighbours, to help each other with voluntary work (e.g. construction or agricultural work). Villagers would visit each other for coffee or (and most importantly) on ritual

---

[23] The basic kinship unit in Abkhazia is the *azhvala* (lineage). According to Inal-Ipa (1965, 406), "[a]s a social unit, *azhvala* was characterised by a supposed or real unique origin, exogamy, a recognised shared territory, some economic interests and religious life, [...] the rules of clan revenge, hospitality, mutual aid and so on."

occasions in connection with life-cycle events such as the birth of a child, marriage or death.

In the urban centres, most importantly in Sukhumi, interaction and intimacy among neighbours was strengthened through the architecture of the courtyards (*dvory*), which led to the emergence of a culture often referred to as "international" (*internatsional'nii*). A characteristic feature of many cosmopolitan cities across the Soviet Union, the *dvory* were places "where initial strangers developed a sense of neighbourliness that cut across ethnic and social divisions" (Skvirskaja 2010, 87); in fact, as Vera Skvirskaja (2010, 87) noted in her research on co-existence in Odessa, "any description of a Soviet courtyard features a list of different natsional'nosti (ethnicities)". This was also the case in Sukhumi. As a current resident remembered,

> [b]efore the war, we lived at the corner of Oktiab'rskaia Street (today Sakharov) and Lakoba. Underneath us was the office of "Abkhazknigi". The courtyard was multinational: Georgians, Georgian Jews, Armenians, Mingrelians, Russians, Ukrainians, and, as far as I remember, five Abkhaz families." (quoted in Voitsekhovskii 2017, n.p.)

Even in the city, this multinational neighbourliness involved a form of intimacy that could be quasi-familial. As an Abkhaz woman (Esma) who grew up in Sukhumi explains, the post-war generation

> will never know the joy of the mutual interaction that we had. Those warm interpersonal relations of our international Abkhazia, when in the morning my father could go onto the balcony in our courtyard and call our neighbour: "Leila, come into the courtyard, let's have coffee!", when the problems of each single person became the problem of the whole courtyard and everyone was looking for a solution, trying to help each other. (quoted in Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 130)

On both sides, people often remember the bonds of "brotherhood" that existed, alluding to the frequent occurrence of close cross-ethnic friendships and solidarity, particularly among men.[24] For instance, in a 2004 documentary, an interviewee remembers that "we Georgians used to regard Abkhaz in the same way we looked on fellow Georgians, like friends and brothers" (Studio Re 2004). Here, "brother" (*brat*) does not refer to relations of blood but to the existence of a certain level of trust and loyalty among Georgians and Abkhaz that once existed; in essence, a brother is a

---

[24] In my experience, the brotherhood discourse is more widespread in Georgia, where it is also reproduced on a political level.

person who proves himself to be helpful, loyal and trustworthy.[25] As one of my Abkhaz interlocutors from Sukhumi remembered, there were frequent fights between locals and tourists in which the "local" (*mestnie*) Georgians would side with the Abkhaz and other locals, even against tourists from Tbilisi (the "external" Georgians, a category that I will discuss in more detail later). This suggests that, at least in some situations, belonging to the local social fabric was just as important, if not more important, than having the same ethnicity.

The often described everyday "internationalism" that people recalled thus had a significant local basis grounded in friendships and other personal relationships as well as certain "local" codes of behaviour that cut across ethnic categorisation and thus distinguished insiders and outsiders on a non-ethnic basis. But in addition to referring to the whole of Abkhazia and thus the differences between those from Abkhazia and those from outside of it, "local" also described specific identities within Abkhazia. A particularly strong local identity was ascribed to the native inhabitants of Sukhumi, i.e. the so-called "Sukhumchanin" (male) or "Sukhumchanka" (female). In the words of a current resident, "*Sukhumchane* – that once was a separate nation (*otdel'naia natsiia*), consisting of all nationalities. You could distinguish us only by our manner of speaking" (quoted in Voitsekhovskii 2017, n.p.). As the following excerpt from an interview with my contact Daur illustrates, being a native of Sukhumi was strongly associated with equality, in particular the ability to talk to people from diverse backgrounds, and thus had an important moral dimension:

> You know, I liked how we lived before the war. Mutual relations were very good and there was a strong sense of equality and equal communication that I think was very characteristic of Sukhum. Take the *Brekhalovka* [a Soviet-era open-air café], for example. There you would find an academic next to a shoemaker, the first secretary of the Obkom and, let's say, a thief in law (*vor v zakone*). And they would all find a common language (*obshchii iazyk*), but at the same time everyone knew their place and knew what was appropriate and what wasn't. This strong sense of order prevented social conflict. For example, if a thief in law was sitting there, drinking coffee, and a police officer arrived, he knew that they were not supposed to sit at the same table. Everyone was aware of this perfectly. Today, they happily sit together.

---

[25] In its most general sense, someone can be called a "brother" who provides help or assistance in a specific context and can therefore even refer to a helpful stranger on the street. In a more particular sense, a brother is a close friend and a person of trust, i.e. a confidant (*doverennoe litso*).

In addition to shared *local* codes of behaviour, multi-national co-existence was also fostered by the exposure to tourists and workers from all over the Soviet Union and beyond. As the former *de facto* minister of foreign affairs, Maxim Gvinjia, recalls in a documentary (Baudelaire 2014), "[w]e lived a very good life here. We were exposed to world culture. It was an 'easy' place. It was like New York, like a smaller version." One of my interlocutors described Soviet Abkhazia as a "big hospital": because of the good climate, people who worked in coal mines were given *putevki*[26] (vouchers) to travel to Abkhazia, where they stayed in sanatoria, rest homes or tourist bases. Guests came from all over the Soviet Union, but there were also foreign tourists from the Warsaw Pact countries like the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland or Bulgaria. As a result, "Abkhazia, even though it was located somewhat in the periphery, was a sufficiently lively place", as my interlocutor put it.

Diane Koenker (2013) has argued that vacation played an important role in Soviet ideology, not only as a means of restoring the physical well-being of workers, but also to provide a glimpse into what an abundant socialist future would look like.[27] Abkhazia was one of the rare places that promised such an experience and particularly attractive due to its peculiar geographical location in between the mountains and the sea. However, this also meant that even though the Soviet vacation became accessible to more and more Soviet citizens under Khrushchev, "the steep and narrow seaside permitted few good places and these were reserved for the privileged" (Sideri 2012, 270). For instance, in the words of the manager of the prestigious Pitsunda resort, which was constructed in the 1960s at the personal request of Khrushchev during a visit to his adjacent dacha, "in Soviet times the resort was called the 'pearl of Abkhazia' [...]. And indeed, back then it was almost impossible to vacation at the resort for an ordinary person. In five of the buildings were foreigners, and only in two were citizens of the Soviet Union vacationing, and then to get a *putevka* was almost impossible..." (quoted in Sharia 2014, n.p.).

Yet, in addition to exclusive zones like Pitsunda, there was also the emerging phenomenon of so-called "wild" or unplanned tourism, which developed as a by-product of mass tourism and the growing demand for recreational facilities that the

[26] *Putevki* "entitled the recipient to a course of treatment, food, and lodging at a designated institution for a particular period of time" and were distributed "through a network of kurort bureaus or by arrangement with enterprises or institutions" (Koenker 2013, 29).
[27] As Koenker (2013, 170) has argued, abundance was an important element of Soviet ideology and while access to it was based on hierarchy and limited to the elite under Stalin, "the idea that socialism would eventually provide abundance for all was central".

Soviet regime was struggling to fulfil (Noack 2006). It was in particular this form of travel, where "you take your car and just travel and see if you get lucky", as one contact described it, which allowed increased interaction with locals, who would offer accommodation and food. According to one interlocutor from the Abkhaz intelligentsia,

> Local people lived well economically, I mean in comparison with other parts of the Soviet Union, like certain regions in Siberia, where people lived on what they earned. In Abkhazia people received their salaries, and thanks to the "wild" tourists even earned a little bit of extra money. Also, when people came they didn't just pay for accommodation but also ate and bought fruits from local people; they economically supported locals. That's why, in Soviet Abkhazia at that time, in the 60s and 70s, life was a little bit better than elsewhere – of course not compared to the West. Here you had two-storey houses, big houses. For the Soviet Union, this was a lucky place.

In addition to tourism, Abkhazia was an important exporter of luxury goods and while those working in the service industry were often workers from abroad, ethnic Abkhazians were employed in collective farms, including tobacco, tea and citrus plantations. Some of my contacts stressed that the relatively high standard of living also had a positive impact on inter-ethnic relations. When I asked people about how they experienced interethnic relations before the war, in addition to the recurring statement that "nationality did not matter", they often noted that because people had a "good", or at least "normal" life, meaning they had employment and accommodation, they simply weren't preoccupied with the "national question".

3.3.   Crossing boundaries? Abkhaz-Georgian mixed marriages

Another lens through which to explore the subjective meaning of ethnicity on the ground is the phenomenon of so-called "mixed marriages".[28] Unsurprisingly, increased interaction between Abkhaz and Georgians did not only lead to friendships, but also produced family ties through intermarriage. Especially (but not

---

[28] I use the term "mixed marriages" as a category of practice. Theoretically, the idea of "mixing" is problematic to the extent that it presupposes "pure" or "exclusive" identities. As Azra Hromadzic (2013, 34) noted in the context of Bosnia, "ironically, the focus on mixing frequently reifies the ethno-religious groups as substantial identities regardless of their proven elasticity, changeability, and fluidity."

exclusively) in eastern Abkhazia, marriages between Abkhaz and Georgians (or more specifically Mingrelians, but also Svans) are said to have been common.[29]

When I first expressed interest in this phenomenon, my Abkhaz contacts assured me that there was nothing extraordinary about this; after all, "we always lived together", so why wouldn't people get married? In fact, attitudes to these marriages were often described as positive and as interviews with women from mixed families show, nationality was not an important category for them when choosing a partner. According to an Abkhaz woman from Gudauta (quoted in Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 118), "the happiest years – that was the years before the war, when we all lived together harmoniously and did not distinguish who is Abkhaz, and who is Georgian. There were many mixed marriages and nobody blamed others for why they married an Abkhaz woman or got married to a Georgian. We did not have these problems in Abkhazia." Another woman (of Georgian nationality) remembers in more detail:

> I was born in Abkhazia, in an intellectual family. I finished school, then graduated from the institute, met my husband, got married to an Abkhaz. *The thought that I should not marry someone who is not from my nation never even crossed my mind*. I always lived among Abkhaz, my parents were friends with Abkhazians. It was the Abkhaz elite. *I was part of this circle and knew all the customs and traditions.* This is why I did not feel any discomfort when I married my husband." (2006, 88 emphasis added)

Previous social contact with members of the other ethnicity and a certain familiarity with each other's customs and traditions facilitated cross-ethnic marital unions. Like Tone Bringa (1995, 83) noted in her ethnography of life in a Bosnian village in the 1980s, often, "[d]ealing with cultural differences was part of people's most immediate experience of social life outside the confines of their home, and it was therefore an essential part of their identity." This was also the case in many places across Soviet Abkhazia. For example, an Abkhaz woman who grew up in the village of Lata recalls her parents' positive reaction towards marrying a Svan:

> I graduated from Abkhaz school and immediately got married to a Svan from the Kodori valley. His relatives were my neighbours and they arranged for us to get married. *My parents weren't against it, because they lived next to Svans and knew them well.* The wedding took place in the Kodori valley with 250 guests, all my relatives came. In my husband's

---

[29] Unfortunately, there is no official data on the intermarriages between Georgians and Abkhazians in the Soviet period.

house they accepted me well and within a few months I was able to speak Svan freely. I speak Russian, Abkhaz, Mingrelian, Georgian and Svan. Of course, the customs were a little bit different. When I first – in accordance with Abkhaz customs – did not enter the room where my husband's father was sitting, they all went out and forced me to enter the room and sit with them. They did not follow strict customs like the Abkhaz do. And now my parents don't recognise me anymore, I began to observe Svan customs.[30] Although the word of the elders is law for both Svans and Abkhaz. (2006, 50 emphasis added)

However, attitudes were not always positive. In ethnically more homogenous areas where inter-ethnic contact was less frequent, mixed marriages were often frowned upon by parents and other family members. Eka, a Georgian woman who got married to an Abkhaz man remembers:

I will start with how we met: it was in 1982, I was a first-year student. I graduated from school with only one 4 [second highest grade] and, of course, there was no talk about getting married. I was a quiet 17-year old girl, my parents did not expect that their Georgian daughter with a long braid, who always went to the institute and back home on time, would be up to such a move. And then I met my Abkhaz future husband. We were seeing each other for a not very long time, and then I got married to him without my parents' permission. *They were categorically against it. In our district lived exclusively Mingrelians, Georgians, Greeks and for that reason such mixed marriages were condemned.* Then my mum took my side and said courageously: "What significance does nationality have, maybe this is her happiness, her destiny? Everything will be fine." (2006, 65 emphasis added)

And yet attitudes towards mixed marriages did not necessarily depend on inter-ethnic exposure, or the lack thereof, but also on individual family preferences and traditions. Esma, for example, grew up in one of Sukhumi's multinational courtyards. Her family nevertheless opposed her choice to marry a fellow "native of Sukhumi":

I am a native *Sukhumchanka*, was born and raised in Sukhumi. [...] We were a big, traditional Abkhaz family: father, mother and five sisters. [...] I graduated from the Sukhumi musical college, then came to Tbilisi to study at the conservatory. After graduation, I went back home to work. I hadn't been working for long when I got married. My fate turned out in a way that regardless of the outrage of my relatives I got married to a Georgian, a *Sukhumchanin*, a boy who was born and raised in Sukhumi. [...] *My mother was categorically against my marriage, we were a*

---

[30] That her parents "did not recognise her anymore" shows that there was an awareness of cultural differences, but it did not prevent people from (often close) social interaction.

> *traditional Abkhaz family and all of my four sisters' husbands were from native, purely Abkhaz families.*" (2006, 126–27 emphasis added)

As the previous two interview excerpts indicate, even though intermarriage was relatively common, it was still a deviation from the norm of ethnic endogamy. Thus, while people did indeed "grow up together" without perceiving each other primarily through an ethnic lens, there was a tacit understanding that when it came to marriage, it was preferable to choose "one's own". Why was that so important? As Avi Nave (2000, 331) noted in his study of inter-ethnic boundaries in Mauritius, "[n]o other act is as central to the reproduction and maintenance of ethnic group boundaries and cultural traditions as endogamy. Marriage is a social contract regulating reproduction, sexuality, child rearing and enculturation, through which spouse preferences are replicated time and again." Hence, "[i]f Mauritians were to select spouses at random (at least with respect to ethnicity), within a few generations the distinctions between ethnic groups would disappear, giving way to a homogeneous ethnic melange."

However, in the case of Abkhazia, intermarriage did not necessarily threaten ethnic boundaries, at least not for men. According to Abkhaz customs (and as it tends to be the case in the Caucasus more generally), ethnicity is passed on by the father, which means that when a Georgian woman marries an Abkhaz man, their children will not be treated as "mixed", or "half Abkhaz, half Georgian", – as the term "mixed marriage/family" would suggest – but exclusively as Abkhaz.[31] "Mixing" through marriage therefore had different consequences for men and women, for unlike women, who were expected to subordinate their customs to that of their husband and his family, men did not need to worry about passing on their ethnicity. But it did bring up the issue of "cultural compatibility": will she be able to adapt to her husband's traditions and raise their children accordingly?

In this context, ethnic prejudice played an important role. For example, Nina, an Abkhaz woman who grew up in the mining town of Tkvarcheli and then moved to Kindig, a village not far from the coast, recalls the negatives stereotypes that many Abkhaz people held about Svans:

> I got married early, to a Svan. *First my parents were scared and did not want me to get married to a Svan, it was not common for us*, but then they

---

[31] This was also fostered by Soviet citizenship law, according to which children of mixed parents had to choose one of their parents' ethnicity (see chapter 1, section 1).

became really fond of him, like a native son. *When previously Abkhazians talked about Svans, I thought: "Oh, what uncivilised (dikie) people!"*, but then when I first got to Svaneti, I thought: "What a paradise I came to!". [...] I quickly learned to speak Svan and adopted their customs. They were different from Abkhaz customs: Abkhaz women are always on their feet, they always have to do something, to look after everyone all the time, they are not allowed to sit next to the father-in-law, whereas Svans are very democratic – if you want, you can lie down, relax, you can chat with everyone, there are no such strict rules like the Abkhaz have. (2006, 85 emphasis added)

As the excerpt demonstrates, in addition to the fundamental worry about the existence of one's group, there was also a concern that a woman of a different nationality would struggle to adapt to the new cultural environment, laying bare the basic assumption that the behaviour of someone from one's own ethnicity is more predictable and the relationship therefore likely to be more stable. As Nave (2000, 337) observed in Mauritius, "it is 'safer' to marry within one's own ethnic group, to rely upon socially learned preferences and criteria when choosing a spouse. In so doing, the individual is less likely to enter into a marriage only to find his or her partner behaves in unexpected and unacceptable ways, at least this is the perception." This also explains why intermarriage, when it occurred, was more frequent between ethnic Abkhazians and Georgians than, for example, Russians, who were not only regarded as culturally more "distant", but also inferior. The fact that ethnic Abkhazians and Georgians, especially Mingrelians and Svans, share certain customs and values ensured an agreement on the most fundamental cultural aspects, such as the tradition of hospitality and the respect of elders.

So far, the material presented in this section suggests that intermarriage did not weaken ethnic boundaries as such, confirming Frederik Barth's famous argument that "ethnic boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them" (1969, 9). And yet, even though intermarriage among Georgians and ethnic Abkhazians did not lead to the emergence of "persistent hybrid cultural traditions" (Nave 2000, 339) or "multiple ethnic identities" (Gorenburg 2006a, 156), it nevertheless produced subjects for whom practices and traditions of both parents became meaningful and who thus often possessed multiple *cultural repertoires*. This is illustrated by the fact that intermarriage was often easier for those who had "mixed" parents. For instance, when I asked one of my regular contacts, a Mingrelian woman in her 50s who was married to an Abkhaz man, whether it was difficult for her to get accustomed, she explained: "No, not for me. We've always lived here. Our

traditions are very similar. And my mother was Abkhaz." Another example is Tsisana, who had an Abkhaz father and a Georgian mother. Even though she – in accordance with the tradition of patrilineal ethnicity – identified as ethnically Abkhaz, her mixed background familiarised her with the traditions and customs of both Abkhaz and Georgians (Mingrelians). The same was true for her husband, who was ethnically Georgian but had an Abkhaz mother:

> I was born in 1951. My father was Abkhaz, my mother Georgian. [...] *My husband [...] was from Gali. His mother was Abkhaz, which is why we quickly found common ground (obshchii iazik), we did not have any disagreements.* [...] In 1985 our son Manuchar was born, in 1985 our daughter, Nino. Our neighbours were Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Abkhaz, Georgians – we all lived peacefully, nobody paid attention to nationality. (2006, 112 emphasis added)

Unsurprisingly, mixed families were often (but not necessarily) those with the least prejudice vis-à-vis inter-ethnic marriage. Guli, who had a Georgian mother and an Abkhaz father, remembers:

> I was born in Sukhumi in 1957. My mother was Georgian [...]. My father was Abkhaz [...]. My father loved my mother and her relatives very much, he knew Abkhaz, Georgian, Russian, Turkish. [...] At the age of seventeen I got married to Boris Dshopua. He was twenty-three at that time. I first met him at the bar "Chaika", where I went with my girlfriends after class. [...] My husband is a very good person, he has never offended me, not even verbally. We never talked about being from different nations, he never reproached me. We have a different understanding, we completely differently relate to each other [...]. All of my sisters got married to Georgians. My father always said: "Good that my sons-in-law are Georgians, otherwise my spoilt daughters would not have survived in a single traditional Abkhaz family. Are you not ashamed to sit with your father-in-law and drink wine?" I used to reply to him: "My father-in-law likes it!" (laughs). (2006, 16)

Hence, even though the husband's ethnic culture would be the dominant one within the family, inter-ethnic marriages nevertheless produced children who were familiar with and could identify with both cultures even if to varying degrees and depending on the context. One of the reasons for this was that even though children categorically inherited the father's ethnicity, which meant that they considered themselves and were considered by others as exclusively Abkhaz and hence expected to behave in

accordance with Abkhaz code of honour (*apsuara*),[32] it was also important to maintain meaningful relationships with *all* relatives, including on the mother's side, which required a certain understanding of (and respect for) the ethnically specific practices on *both* sides.

At the same time, it is important to note that there were also people who identified first and foremost with a supra-national, Soviet culture rather than the respective ethnic cultures of their parents. This was especially the case in urban centres, where, as explained earlier, ethnicity often took on a more symbolic role.[33] Generational differences played a role too: For example, Rusiko Marshania, an Abkhaz civil society activist who got married to a Georgian and now lives in Tbilisi, explained in a TV interview that she and her father, who had experienced the oppression of Abkhaz culture under Stalin and Beria, differed significantly in their "national consciousness". Whereas her father "was very strongly aware of being Abkhaz" (*gipertrofirovanno chuvstvoval sebia abkhazom*), she was an "absolutely Soviet person" (*absoliutno Sovetskim chelovekom*) for whom ethnic Abkhaz belonging was secondary, i.e. something that she simply inherited and thus took for granted (Telekompaniia Abaza TV 2017b).

In contrast, due to the "limited ability of the socialist state to penetrate the rural periphery of society" (Christophe 2003, 87), ethnic traditions continued to play a more important role in the rural periphery. But both in rural and urban areas, intermarriage significantly facilitated linguistic Russification and also contributed to the widespread knowledge of Mingrelian as a second lingua franca after Russian. Whereas Russian often functioned as a so-called "second native language" for the parents, children of mixed parents usually grew up speaking Russian as a first language. As one of my Abkhaz interlocutors – a man in his late 50s who was married to a Georgian woman – joked: "We used to say: 'The father is Abkhaz, the mother is Georgian, and the child is Russian!'"[34]

---

[32] Costello (2015, 15) defines *apsuara* (or *apswara*) as including "the growth of social standing with age, what is considered worthy conduct and what unworthy, often associated with the conduct that is described in the Abkhaz epic tales of ancient Heroes, the Narts [...], rules for gender relations and the general ideas of collectivity alongside individual responsibilities" as well as "notions of honour (*alamys*), any challenge to which must be rebutted and punished with retribution."

[33] According to the Soviet scholars Arutyunyan and Bromley (1986, 155), the high frequency of intermarriage in urban areas was not only related to more dispersed settlement patters and therefore more opportunities for contact, but was also linked to the stronger influence of modern Soviet culture and Russian language in the cities.

[34] This is in line with observations by Soviet researchers, who noted that Russian became the main language in multi-ethnic families where neither spouse was Russian (Arutyunyan and Bromley 1986, 166; Susokolov 1987, 80). For a detailed discussion, see Maan (2012).

3.4. Tensions on the political level: the emerging issue of territorial ownership

So far, I have demonstrated that even in the aftermath of the Stalinist oppressions, everyday relations between Georgians and Abkhaz were relatively peaceful. This stands in contrast to many of the existing accounts of the history of the conflict, which tend to explore Georgian-Abkhaz relations through the lens of isolated political "events". In this section, I want to shift the focus back to the political sphere, for while inter-personal relations were indeed more or less harmonious, the tensions that continued to erupt on the political level should not be ignored.

In fact, the post-Stalin period witnessed a turn from overt oppression of culture, through attempts at assimilation, to more subtle forms of discrimination, with tensions shifting from the sphere of institutional politics to the area of history and in particular ethnogenesis, which was itself a highly politicised field. In 1954, the Georgian historian and philologist Pavle Ingoroqva published a book in which he challenged the autochthonous status of the ethnic Abkhazians, claiming that they had in fact immigrated from the north Caucasus in the 17th century and only appropriated the ethnonym "Abkhaz". What came to be known as the "Ingoroqva thesis" hence defined Abkhaz as "relative newcomers onto 'Georgian' territory, displacing the 'original' (Kartvelian-speaking) Abkhazians in the 17th century" (Hewitt 2013, 47). This implied, first, that the "real" Abkhaz were in fact Georgians, and second, that contemporary Abkhaz are merely an "immigrant" minority (Coppieters 2004, 196; Shnirelman 2001, 307).

Two years later, in 1956, an article was published in the journal *Mnatobi* by historian Nikoloz Berdzenhishvili, in which he largely agreed with Ingoroqva regarding the origin of the Abkhaz (Kemoklidze 2016, 131). This led to protests by the president of the Abkhazian Council of Ministers and other Abkhazian party officials. As Coppieters (2002, 93) has pointed out, Soviet practice did not allow for the publication of material that would encourage interethnic conflict and "[t]he refusal to censure Ingoroqva's book was therefore a political act." In the Soviet Union, questions of ethnogenesis were highly political, as only indigenous people could claim political autonomy. Framing the ethnic Abkhazians as more recent immigrants consequently had profound political implications, challenging the very foundation of the status of ethnic Abkhazians as the titular nation while at the same

time reinforcing the notion of Abkhazia as a constituent part of the larger Georgian homeland. As Marykhuba (1993, 16) has noted, "[e]ven during Beria's time the autochthony (aboriginality) of the Abkhaz people on the territory of Abkhazia was never disputed!".

In April 1957, gatherings were organised in the Abkhaz villages of Lykhny and Mokva, and a letter was sent to the leadership in Moscow that requested the transfer of the Abkhazian ASSR from the Georgian Republic to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).[35] This, so Coppieters (2002, 93), "was based on the presupposition that it was the exclusive right of the titular nation to determine the political status of its homeland." While the request was denied, pressure was exerted on the Georgian Communist Party (2002, 94). As a result, the authorities in Tbilisi issued a statement in which they claimed that the ideas in the newspaper had been exploited for nationalist purposes and demanded stricter supervision by the head of the sections for propaganda and agitation, science, schools, and culture of the Party Central Committee of Georgia and the Central Committee Secretary (Kemoklidze 2016, 132).

However, ten years later, in 1967, the "Ingoroqva thesis" once again became a source of discontent when the official newspaper of the communist party published a review praising Nikoloz Berdzenishvili's second volume of the "History of Georgia", in which he argued that "the aboriginal population of Abkhazia – the Abkhaz – were in fact one of the Georgian tribes [...] and that these Georgian tribes had been assimilated into the Abkhaz tribes, and that the latter had immigrated to present-day Abkhazia from elsewhere" (Kemoklidze 2016, 143). This again raised indignation among some Abkhaz. On the 28th of March 1967, two actions took place. First, following a complaint by Abkhaz students from the Sukhumi Pedagogical Institute, members of the Abkhaz leadership sent a letter to the Georgian government in Tbilisi, in which they raised their concerns about the attempted falsification of history. Second, the same day, a group of Abkhaz activists from the Gagra district carried out a "bold, for the era highly unusual, political action" (Marykhuba 2000, 73). Using red oil paint, they crossed out Georgian inscriptions "literally everywhere, where the in Abkhazia 'constitutional' Abkhaz language had been ignored" (2000,

---

[35] Although often loosely referred to as "Russia" or "Russian Federation", the RSFSR was not conceived as a homeland of the ethnic Russian population in the same way as the non-Russian republics; instead, it was a place for Russians "to feel at home nationally' without 'evolving into the institutional representative of Russian national interests" (Martin 1998, 113).

73), including signboards of state institutions and enterprises in the district, traffic signs at bus stops, as well as the "Georgian" works by the famous sculptor Zurab Tsereteli, such as the map of Georgia in the Pitsunda resort. In Gagra, one activist changed the Georgian inscription of the restaurant "Gagripshi" by shooting down the Georgian "i", which fell into two parts, leaving the Abkhaz name "Gagripsh" (2000, 73–74).

The next morning, several arrests took place. Appeals were made by Abkhaz elders for their release, but without success. This triggered a larger process of mobilisation: First, supporters started to meet on Lenin square in Sukhumi to protest the disregard of the Abkhaz language and demand the release of the activists (2000, 74). In the following days, more and more people started coming to the capital and gathered in the philharmonic concert hall, despite orders to vacate the building. On the 10th of March, a commission was formed for the purpose of drafting a letter addressed to the Central Committee in Moscow and a delegation was elected to physically deliver it. Despite threats, they arrived in Moscow by train two days later, where they revised the original letter to fit ideological requirements, declaring that "Abkhazia can no longer remain autonomous within the Georgian SSR" (2000, 83). Struggling to get access to the committee, they submitted the document at the reception of the Central Committee and left for Sukhumi over a week after their arrival. Upon their return, several members of the delegation – mostly academics from the Pedagogical Institute – were dismissed from their posts (2000, 87).[36]

The events of the late 1960s laid the foundation for the emergence of the Abkhaz national movement and a growing national consciousness among the Abkhaz population. According to Marykhuba (2000, 74), the political activism in Gagra and Pitsunda was especially significant in this context because "[i]t was the first opposition of the Abkhaz against the colonial politics of Georgia in relation to Abkhazia performed not through 'traditional' personal or collective petitions to the superior organs of the USSR, Georgia and Abkhazia". The late 1960s also marked a turn in the goals of political activists. After the events of 1967, the concerns of the Abkhaz national movement increasingly shifted from the spheres of culture and history to the question of Abkhazia's *political* status (see also Shesterinina 2014, chap. 3).

---

[36] According to Kemoklidze (2016, 133), little is known about the response by the Kremlin but she suggests that the growing number of publications in Abkhaz in the first half of the 1970s could be read as an attempt to address some of the grievances.

In 1977, another letter was sent to the Central Committee in Moscow amidst the debates surrounding the new Soviet Constitution. In this letter, separation from Georgia was already explicitly proposed as a solution to the growing Georgian cultural influence in Abkhazia. When the letter was again countered with repressions by the Georgian Central Committee, which accused the 130 signatories of treachery, this – according to one of the signatories (Marykhuba 2000, 95) – caused "waves of indignation" throughout Abkhazia, with several larger meetings taking place over the following months in the villages of Bzyb (Gagra district), Abgarkhiru, Zvandripsh and Lykhny (all Gudauta district) and Pakuash (Ochamchira district), as well as the cities Tkvarcheli and Sukhumi. The biggest gathering took place in the village of Lykhny in western Abkhazia, with a crowd of more than 12,000 people (2000, 99). According to Marykhuba, there were also critical, or "pro-Georgian" voices among the Abkhaz population, including state officials and members of the Abkhaz intelligentsia. For instance, one poet – who was holding a high political post at that time – is said to have openly stated that "all trouble in Abkhazia comes from the Bzyb Abkhazians [Abkhazians from Gudauta]" (2000, 98), thus locating the origin of Abkhaz national sentiments specifically in the Gudauta region in central Abkhazia.

But, in the words of Abkhaz journalist Vitali Sharia (1993, n.p.), the "unfolding national mass movement was already hard to stop". One of the more radical propositions that was circulated at the various meetings was to include in the new constitution the right of autonomous republics to be moved from one Union Republic to another. In reaction to these discussions, on the 22nd of May, another mass meeting took place in Sukhumi, where politburo member Ivan Kapitonov announced that all issues will be resolved with the exception of the demand for the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia, arguing that this would fundamentally contradict the Leninist nationality policy of the party (Marykhuba 2000, 106). On the 1st of July, a package of policies for the further development of the economy and culture of the Abkhazian ASSR was decided. Measures to boost Abkhaz cultural autonomy included the transformation of the Pedagogical Institute into the Abkhazian State University, the opening of the Dmitri Gulia Institute for Language, Literature and History, which provided "a hub for the development of the Abkhaz *intelligentsia*" (Kemoklidze 2016, 135) and the launch of an Abkhazian television station, which broadcasted a few hours of Abkhaz-language programmes per week

(Coppieters 2002, 96). Measures were also taken to improve the economic and environmental situation in Abkhazia, including significant new economic investment in the town of Tkvarcheli, which had struggled with high rates of unemployment due to declining coal mining operations, as well as in the Ochamchira and Gudauta district. New roads were built to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution in the coastal cities and deforestation was stopped (Slider 1985, 64).

These changes did, indeed, address some of the grievances that had been raised, for even though many of my Abkhaz interlocutors remember Abkhazia as a place with a comparatively high standard of living, where people had "normal lives" in comparison to their post-war existence, including access to education and employment, in reality, ethnic Abkhazians had fewer educational opportunities and were also benefitting less from the economic development of Abkhazia (Slider 1985). For instance, in the 1977 letter, the authors bemoaned the poor state of the Pedagogical Institute in Sukhumi, noting the importance of opening a proper university in Abkhazia (Marykhuba 1994, 171). This was particularly problematic given how difficult it was for Abkhaz to enter universities in Georgia, where entrance exams were held in Georgian, which, according to the 1979 census, was only known by 1.4 percent (Slider 1985, 55). According to the letter, many young Abkhaz people were therefore facing a dilemma: "either to remain without a higher qualification or to leave Georgia in order to attend a higher school" (Marykhuba 1994, 171).

Lower levels of education also contributed to certain class differences (although officially class did not exist in the Soviet Union). For instance, in 1970, 50.7% of ethnic Abkhazians were kolkhoz peasants, 30.2% were workers and 19.0% white collar workers, compared to 32.6% kolkhoz peasants, 40.9% workers and 26.4% white collar workers among the Georgian population. Ethnic Abkhazians were therefore facing significant socio-economic disadvantages within an economy that was less developed than that of other regions of Soviet Georgia due to inadequate rates of investment (Slider 1985, 57–59).

3.5.   The political and personal: micro-level conflicts

In his analysis of the crisis, Slider (1985, 65) concludes that "it is clear that a potentially explosive situation has been rather effectively defused". Yet, even though large-scale clashes had been avoided and many interlocutors described everyday

relations as peaceful overall, the tensions on the formal level also had their impact on interpersonal relations. From an Abkhaz viewpoint, "Georgification" in the post-Stalin period was implemented through two interrelated processes: First, through theoretical attempts to discredit Abkhaz history and to rewrite it as an integral part of the Georgian nation and, second, through the practice of continuous settlement of Georgians to Abkhazia. This combination nourished resentment among (at least certain) Abkhazians vis-à-vis the Georgian population, an emotion that Roger Petersen (2002, 40), following Horowitz, described as "the feeling of being politically dominated by a group that has no right to be in a superior position".

According to Petersen (2002, 41), it is "the everyday experience of these perceived status relations that breeds the emotion". The Abkhaz protest letter from 1977 provides some insight into how resentment was (re-)produced on a micro level. In the letter, the authors speak of an "organised, planned flooding of Abkhazia with cadres from Tbilisi and other districts of Georgia, and that only of Georgian nationality! They send everyone, starting from the secretary of the regional party, city committee, district committee, representative of the Council of Ministers of the Abkhazian ASSR, ending with simple workers" (Marykhuba 1994, 171). A few pages later, they mention how this in-migration caused micro-level clashes with locals. In Gagra, for instance,

> Tbilisi cannot come to terms with the situation that Armenians constitute the majority of the population in this district. [...] Now, the "Gagra zone" is closed for everyone, but, of course, not for Georgians! Not only do they send qualified cadres, but also whole brigades of workers from the central districts of Georgia. *And they behave openly cynically and defiantly in relation to the local population*. Conflicts on the basis of nationality have become frequent. All this is happening in front of foreign tourists and guests who are here to vacation. (1994, 175, emphasis added)

As the ideas of Ingoroqva and the likes became normalised and the proportion of the Georgian population grew larger, benign ignorance could turn into outright hostility or disrespect, especially among later generations of immigrants and temporary visitors. While little is known about how widespread these ideas were outside of elite circles, the recollections by American anthropologist Paula Garb, who travelled to Abkhazia from 1979 onwards to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Abkhaz longevity, suggest that they had taken some hold. In an interview that was

broadcasted on Abkhaz TV as part of the project "biographical salon", she remembers:

> The main thing that was interesting for me was [that] when I travelled to Abkhazia, I had read the history of Abkhazia as well as the history of Georgia, having prepared and read all the American and Western sources … and when I went to Abkhazia and, for example, someone on the plane would ask me where I was going and what I was doing and I said that I was studying long-living Abkhazians, the answer could be – and that happened quite often – "no, there is no such people" […]. These talks hurt my identity as a scientist, [suggesting] that I was mistaken and that the people who I was studying did not even exist. And I imagined what it would feel like if I was Abkhaz and living in this country and I would be told that "no, there is no such thing", because it hurt me as a scholar. (Telekompaniia Abaza TV 2017a)

Garb's description of these encounters as "hurtful" points to the important but often neglected role of emotions and affect in the making of group boundaries. It raises important questions: how did the different theories about the origin of the Abkhaz make people feel? Challenging core aspects of Abkhaz identity and in particular their relationship to their land, the attempts to rewrite Abkhaz history were not merely intellectual endeavours that occurred in a vacuum; playing into already existing fears of ethnic survival due to negative experiences in the past and challenging the very identity of the Abkhaz people, they were insulting and humiliating. As Coppieters (2002, 93) has noted, "[t]he Abkhazian idea of a nation was based on the belief that the links between a community, its ethnic origin and its ancestral land were sacred. Ingoroqva's thesis was perceived as an insult to the nation."[37]

Insults are important because of the feelings and actions they can generate and how that can affect and ultimately change relations between individuals and the groups that they identify with. According to Karina Korostelina (2014, 216), "[i]ntergroup insults represent attempts to strip the insulted group of a positive identity and decrease its power. Such acts are intended to redefine the social boundary and power hierarchy between the parties, leading to the disruption of established positive relationships or perpetuating such disruption." Consequently,

---

[37] According to Kemoklidze (2014, 186, 2016, 139), statements that the Abkhaz did not exist as a people were misunderstood; what was contested was whether the Abkhaz were a "nation" (*natsiia*) (and could thus claim statehood) or a "people" (*narod*). Hence, what was implied was that the Abkhaz did not exist as a *nation*.

they change "the dynamics of intergroup interactions, provoking new conflicts or deepening old resentments, reshaping perceptions between the groups, and changing relationships between them. Insult plays an essential role in many intergroup conflicts and resides at the heart of their dynamics" (2014, 215). And while insults do not necessarily lead to aggressive behaviour or violence, there is some evidence that suggests that people from so-called "cultures of honour" – which applies to Abkhazia – are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour when insulted (Cohen and Nisbett 1994).

This might explain how nationality-based insults could lead to violent clashes, particularly among men and in everyday contexts, where formal constraints were absent. As Shesterinina (2014, 107) discovered in her research, everyday fights often began with the question of why the Abkhaz don't know the Georgian language. This was perceived as a direct attack on Abkhaz identity, as it implied that not the Georgians, but the Abkhaz were the "real" newcomers living on Georgian soil and therefore the ones who were expected to adapt. According to oral testimonies, these earlier violent incidents were more likely to involve more recent settlers, who had not grown up in Abkhazia, as the 1977 protest letter indicates, and Georgian visitors, especially young tourists from Tbilisi, who behaved in ways that were perceived as shameful according to Abkhaz cultural norms (see also Shesterinina 2014, 108).[38]

Depending on their location and the intensity of inter-group contact, older-generation Georgians living in Abkhazia are said to have been more acculturated to "local" sensitivities, or, in other words, had a greater degree of cultural intimacy. As one of Shesterinina's (2014, 108) interviewees reported, "clashes were mostly brought in by [Georgian] visitors. Locals did not take up arms [before the war], did not get into fights. They lived here, were neighbors. They needed to come to weddings, funerals, birthdays with me. They did not like [confrontations] and blamed the politics of Tbilisi." In certain ways, "Georgification" also put pressure on the "local Georgians", for unlike the "external Georgians", they had often accommodated themselves to the use of Russian as a lingua franca and were therefore more "Russified" in the eyes of outsiders, although for them, Russian was less a symbol of cultural domination, as it could be perceived by Georgians from

---

[38] Such transgressions were also committed by visitors from other parts of the Soviet Union, including Russians.

other regions, than a "cosmopolitan" language, as one of my interlocutors – who had to learn his own "native" Georgian upon fleeing from Abkhazia – stressed.[39]

While the policies that were adopted in response to the 1977-78 protests addressed some of the Abkhaz grievances, it had the opposite effect among Georgians, some of whom are said to have been felt increasingly dominated by an Abkhaz minority. According to Slider (1985, 65), "[t]he reaction by many Georgians, both within and outside Abkhazia, is that these measures are worse than unjustified concessions — many are perceived as discriminatory." Samizdat documents reveal claims that the policy changes went further than officially announced, including the assertion that Georgians were increasingly prevented from moving to Abkhazia, and those already living there were not allowed to build new homes in certain districts of Abkhazia. There were also allegations that the Abkhaz ministry of internal affairs promoted only non-Georgians, which supposedly also led to the cover-up of crimes committed by Abkhazians. As Slider (1985, 65) found, there were also two cases in which Georgians who openly criticised the discrimination "by the minority against the majority" were allegedly falsely charged of criminal behaviour.

According to Kemoklidze (2016, 140), the 1970s marked a shift from "Georgianisation" to "Abkhazianisation" that was most apparent in the political structures, where given their low numbers (83,097 compared to 213,322 Georgians in the 1979 census), ethnic Abkhazians were clearly overrepresented: In the late 1980s, there were 55 ethnic Abkhazians and 56 Georgians in the Supreme Soviet of the Republic, 47% Georgians versus 26% Abkhazians in the local Soviets, and key positions in the Soviet of Ministers of Abkhazia were occupied by 16 Abkhazians and 24 Georgians (Shnirelman 2001, 211). But the situation appears to be more complicated. When I asked about this topic during my fieldwork, I was usually told that even though the Abkhaz formally received preferential treatment, their factual power was very limited, since the most important decisions were made either in Moscow or Tbilisi. As one of my interviewees, a member of the Abkhazian intelligentsia, argued, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Abkhazia, who had to be Abkhaz and was followed by a Georgian and Russian as second and third

---

[39] During my research among displaced persons from Abkhazia, I encountered several people who reported that Russian had been their first language and who struggled with their Georgian language skills after displacement from Abkhazia. Once, during a dinner in Tbilisi, a Georgian man told me that he remembered feeling irritated when he encountered two refugee boys at his school who conversed with each other in Russian: "I remember that I went there and asked them: 'Why don't you speak your own language?'"

secretary (as was the case in other SSRs), "did not have any power. [...] In principle, they decided very small questions like the appointment of the director of a factory."

But there was another issue that resurfaced, namely the possible discrepancy between a person's official (passport) ethnicity and how they identified themselves (and were identified by others). During my fieldwork, my interlocutors occasionally brought up cases where people's subjective identity was different to their official Soviet "passport identity". Sometimes, this seemed to have happened by mistake; however, there were also cases of people who changed their official ethnicity later in their lives, often for opportunistic reasons.[40] As Dmitry Gorenburg (2006b, 295) has noted in his study of assimilatory policies in the USSR, "while difficult, individual ethnic reidentification was not impossible. [...] There are numerous reports of individuals having the ethnicity listed in their passports changed, most often in order to ease promotion within the Communist Party hierarchy." According to a Georgian contact in Tbilisi, whose family was from Abkhazia, there was even a saying that "being Abkhaz is not a nationality, it's a profession", referring to the privileges that being categorised as Abkhaz could involve in the political and administrative sphere and suggesting that this was the reason that many Georgians officially "became" Abkhaz.[41] Another one of my Mingrelian contacts suspected that, because of those who were formally registered as Abkhaz, the actual number of ethnic Abkhazians living in Abkhazia in Soviet times was even smaller than the official census data suggests.

The extent to which people changed their official ethnicity is impossible to establish. But what is relevant in the context of this work is not so much whether and to what extent this was true, but the uncertainty and resentment that it possibly created. It also shows that, after all, unlike it is often assumed, ethnicity in the Soviet Union was not necessarily "fixed" by documents.

---

[40] The above-quoted contact, for example, mentioned the story of two brothers, who had an Abkhaz father but who were registered as having different nationalities – one as Abkhaz and one as Georgian. As my interlocutor mentioned, ironically, the "Abkhaz" one ended up living in Tbilisi already before the war whereas the Georgian one stayed in Abkhazia long after the war.
[41] Kemoklidze (2014, 187) mentions similar stories by her Georgian interlocutors from Abkhazia.

3.6. Conclusion

This was the second of three chapters that explore the complex process of negotiating inter-group boundaries in Abkhazia, focusing on the period after Stalin's death up until before the late 1980s. While this period is usually exclusively depicted as one of antagonism, what the material presented in this chapter suggests is that even though a vocabulary of antagonistic ethnicity existed, it was not dominant before the first outbreak of violence in 1989. As I showed, a combination of traumatic events did indeed nourish a fear of ethnic extinction that was channelled into fundamental mistrust towards the Georgian state and people, in particular Mingrelians. Yet, this mistrust did not keep ordinary people from establishing close and meaningful relationships in their everyday lives. Contrary to the widespread belief that internationalism was an ideology imposed by the regime that failed to take hold among a population which identified exclusively in terms of nationality, ethnicity was not "the primary lens through which people viewed their relationships" (Bergholz 2016, 308). In fact, there was a strong local, inter-national identity that united people from different ethnicities. This was particularly the case in Sukhumi, where residents could identify as much as *Sukhumchane* as they identified as members of their respective ethnicities. While it is also true that there was little "fluidity" in a postmodern sense and many did identify exclusively with one ethnic group (and practised its respective customs), the strength of this identification could vary significantly. Similar to what Tone Bringa (1995, 83) observed in pre-war Bosnia, difference in ethnic affiliation "was one of the many differences between people, like differences between men and women, villager and city dweller. It was acknowledged and often joked about but it never precluded friendship."

Hence, despite previous experiences and memories of violence and forced resettlement, people were connected through ties of neighbourhood, friendship, gender (e.g. masculinity) and work but also *family*. The chapter thus also foregrounds the existence of so-called "mixed" Abkhaz-Georgian families – a phenomenon that has rarely received much attention in the literature on inter-ethnic relations in the Soviet Union. But to what extent is the fact that mixed marriages occurred an indication for the "merging" (*sliianie*) of nations, as envisioned by the Soviet regime (Edgar 2007, 586)? From the material presented here, it becomes

clear that although the occurrence of inter-ethnic marriages between Abkhaz and Georgians (mostly Mingrelians and Svans) was a symptom of cultural and social proximity as well as the strength of local identity (that was often inter-national), it did not challenge the existence of ethnic boundaries as such due to the custom of patrilineal ethnicity. However, even though their identities were not necessarily "fluid", children of mixed parents were nevertheless often equipped with multiple cultural repertoires and, as a consequence, prone to intermarriage themselves.

And yet, while past negative events did not prevent close inter-personal contact, they fostered a mental template that could be triggered. As I suggested in the second half of the chapter, the ideas spread by Ingoroqva and other historians and their toleration by the Georgian political elites reactivated existing fears of ethnic extinction in the post-Stalin period. While not leading to large-scale clashes, they had an important impact on inter-ethnic relations. Attacking the core values of Abkhaz identity (their separate existence from Georgians and their unique attachment to their land), they in fact strengthened the national consciousness among the Abkhaz population. More specifically, they spurred the development of the Abkhaz national movement and fostered the belief among members of the Abkhaz intelligentsia that political co-existence within the same political boundaries was increasingly difficult.

Some violent clashes occurred on the informal level, but as the material suggests, they were largely confined to fights between locals and outsiders. As the chapter illustrates, the cleavages that emerged did not always neatly run along ethnic lines. Instead, a distinction was made between local Georgians, who were born and raised in Abkhazia, and outsiders. According to oral testimony, parts of the local Georgian (Mingrelian) population – especially those with social or familial ties to ethnic Abkhazians – sided with their Abkhaz peers against "outsiders" or at least refrained from provocative behaviour. This was because the growing influence of Georgian culture was not only an attack on Abkhaz culture, but also the "lived internationalism" that distinguished Abkhazia from other regions.

By looking at everyday experiences of ethnicity in Soviet times, this chapter has sought to provide a more comprehensive picture of the Georgian-Abkhaz relationship that goes beyond the institutional sphere. While it shows how relations became increasingly antagonistic, it also demonstrates that there was both conflict *and* peace. This provides a more nuanced alternative to the dominant narratives by

the conflict parties themselves, which tend to either stress conflict (as in the case of Abkhazia) or unity (as in the case of Georgia). In the next chapter, I will focus on the period shortly before, during and immediately after the war and explore how the military intervention of Georgian troops set off a process of so-called antagonistic collective ethnic categorisation that led to the maximum rigidification of group boundaries, enabling the mass displacement of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia.

Chapter 4. Ethnicity and Violence in the Georgian-Abkhaz War (1992-1993)

As I argued in the previous chapter, relations between Georgians and ethnic Abkhazians on the ground were relatively peaceful. What changed? In this chapter, I argue that even though micro-level clashes did occur on the ground prior to the war, it was ultimately the military intervention in August 1992 – initiated by external actors – and the extreme violence that unfolded that turned Georgians and Abkhaz into deadly enemies.

Despite the interest in the conflict and its historical and political evolution, few scholars have taken a specific look at the dynamics of the violence itself. This is even more surprising given the intensity of the fighting. The Georgian-Abkhaz war, which began in August 1992 and lasted 14 months, was relatively short but extraordinarily brutal. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) (1995, 5), it was characterised by a "reckless disregard for the protection of the civilian population" and "gross violations of international humanitarian law - the laws of war." Combatants not only "deliberately targeted and indiscriminately attacked civilians and civilian structures, killing hundreds of civilians through bombing, shelling and rocket attacks"; they also "terrorized the local population through house-to-house searches, and engaged in widespread looting and pillage, stripping civilians of property and food."

Instead, the mass violence that broke out with the arrival of (para-)military troops in Abkhazia has been treated as somewhat of an epilogue, as if the course of events that followed had already been determined before the violence erupted. However, for the people who lived through the war, it is this violence – more than anything that happened before – that ultimately redefined Georgian-Abkhaz relations. The aim of this chapter is therefore to treat the war as an event in its own right. To do so, it first looks at the conditions of violence. What triggered the violence and how did it impact relations and identities on the ground? Following Shesterinina (2014, chap. 4), I distinguish between two different levels of violence: first, the micro-level violence that occurred in July 1989 and second, the war itself, which was triggered by macro-level actors. I argue that, while ethnicity provided a "script" for the military troops that entered Abkhazia in August 1992, the violence that unfolded was not always and not necessarily motivated by ethnic hatred; rather it provided

an opportunity to loot. However, once the violence was unleashed, it developed a life of its own that turned those on the ground into "deadly enemies".

4.1.   The onset of perestroika and the clashes of 1989

The perestroika movement under Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s had a significant impact on Georgian-Abkhaz relations. As Coppieters (2002, 97) has noted, the political reforms that were under way "made new kinds of political mobilization possible and brought to the fore the question of redistributing power among élites and national groups." Moreover, whereas the expression of "nationalist" sentiments was previously frowned upon, perestroika suddenly provided the conditions and opportunity to be more outspoken. Thus, in 1988, members of the Abkhaz elite sent another letter to the centre, in which they, *for the first time*, suggested restoring Abkhazia's status as an independent republic.[42]

While Abkhaz elites began to openly mobilise for the restoration of Abkhazia's status as an independent Union Republic and thus Abkhazia's independence from Georgia, Georgians reacted by increasingly demanding Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union as well as the abolishment of its internal autonomous units (Shesterinina 2014, 133). By that time, the relationship between Georgian elites and the centre in Moscow had already significantly deteriorated, a shift that had its roots in Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in his secret speech in 1956, which triggered large-scale protests in favour of Stalin in Tbilisi. It was only then that Georgian nationalism took a distinctive anti-Soviet turn, paving the way for the development of a national independence movement (Blauvelt and Smith 2016).

In reaction to the increasing rhetoric against non-Georgians promoted by the Ilya Chachavadze Society (founded in 1987), on 18 March 1989 around 30,000 Abkhazian residents gathered in the village of Lykhny, where a declaration was signed that once again called for the reinstatement of Abkhazia as a Union Republic. This event, which was organised by the Abkhaz national organisation *Aidgylara* ("unity"), which had been formed the previous year, was a turning point in that it mobilised both elite and non-elite actors as well as non-Abkhaz residents, including Russians and Armenians (Shesterinina 2014, 134; Hewitt 2013, 61). The declaration caused much outrage among representatives of the Georgian national movement,

---

[42] See "Letter of 'sixty' to the XIX All-Union Party Conference" in Marykhuba (1994, 383–439).

who responded with an even more inflammatory language. For example, one of the main opposition leaders, Merab Kostava, is reported to have announced at a meeting in the Abkhazian town of Gandiati (today Tsandrypsh) that "[w]e are constructing a black day for the little group of Abkhazian separatists! In truth these days Abkhazians don't have enough brains; in reality let them thank us that they are living on our land. If they want anything, let them ask the Georgian government for it. They live in Georgia, and any questions should be decided via the Georgian government" (quoted in Hewitt 2013, 63). It also became increasingly common to refer ethnic Abkhazians as "Apswas" – a derogatory term that aims to distinguish the modern-day Abkhaz from the "true Abkhaz" (1993, 283).

The first serious escalation took place on 1 April, when Georgian activists organised a meeting in the village of Leselidze (now Giachrypsh) near the Russian border during which protesters were said to have waved Menshevik flags (see Lezhava 1997, 226–27), which, as mentioned in chapter 2, had come to be seen as a symbol of oppression by many Abkhaz and thus immediately caused irritation. Once the official demonstration had ended, Abkhaz activists stopped a bus with Georgian protesters by throwing stones. According to testimonies, those protesters who refused to remove their Menshevik flags and shouted "This is our land!" were beaten up. A second bus with Georgian students returning from a funeral was attacked in Sukhumi, even though it stood in no relation to the protests (Shesterinina 2014, 136).

On 4 April 1989, student demonstrations against the Lykhny declaration began to take place in Tbilisi, where calls were made for the annulment of autonomous formations within Georgia. On 9 April, Soviet troops violently ended the demonstrations and twenty people were killed. The violence against demonstrators was the last straw in an already deteriorating relationship between Georgian elites and the Soviet centre and protesters started to demand to separate from the Soviet Union (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006, 8). From early May onwards, Georgian students began to strike in Sukhumi and demanded for the Georgian section of the university to be turned into a local branch of Tbilisi State University (and thereby under the direct control of Tbilisi), a request that was later approved by Tbilisi without the consultation with the Soviet Ministry of Education in Moscow (Hewitt 2013, 75).

On 26 May, the Rustaveli and Chavchavadze Societies – the two main groupings of the Georgian independence movement – organised unsanctioned rallies

to celebrate Georgia's Independence Day. Menshevik flags were put up on the Constitution Square in Sukhumi; another flag was raised at Abkhazia's border with Russia. As Shesterinina (2014, 139) has noted, "[u]sing these symbols the action conveyed the Georgian claims to Abkhazia as the Georgian land and could not leave the Abkhaz uninvolved." Thanks to a heavy police presence, immediate clashes were avoided. The next day, a memorial to the victims from 9 April was erected in Ochamchira, where locals put down flowers. When Abkhaz reacted with protests, the authorities decided to take down the monument (2014, 140).

The situation finally escalated in mid-July, when, despite the USSR Supreme Soviet's objection to the establishment of another university institution in Sukhumi, the Georgian administration decided to go ahead and conduct entrance examinations. At this time, ethnic Abkhazians were already well organised through the networks of *Aidgylara*. When news about the admission exams began to circulate, large numbers of Abkhaz immediately started to picket the school where the exams were supposed to take place to prevent people from entering. Meanwhile a group of Georgians gathered in Rustaveli Park, where they, according to witnesses, were appealing to Gamsakhurdia and shouting that Abkhazia was their land. Clashes broke out when an Abkhaz student tried to take pictures of the crowd and, refusing to destroy the film, was beaten. A woman ran to the Abkhaz protesters at the school, shouting that Georgians were killing Abkhazians. They immediately rushed to the park and armed themselves with random objects (stones, fences etc) on the way. Many people were injured and several died. Fuelled by the violence, Abkhaz protesters then broke into the school where the entrance exam was taking place; once inside, they injured Georgian professors as well as students and began destroying documents (2014, 143–44).

The rumours about the violence set off a mobilisation process across Abkhazia, with both Georgians and Abkhaz from various regions making their way to Sukhumi to demonstrate their support. Groups of Svans brought in weapons and attempted to block Abkhaz supporters coming from Ochamchira. Ethnic Abkhaz from Tkvarcheli used explosives against the Svans. In order to avoid further clashes, the Abkhazian leadership appealed to the centre to intervene. However, clashes continued in Ochamchira, where Georgians had been agitated by the death of Gali residents in the fighting. One of the leaders of the all-Georgian movement arrived and brought with him supporters from Western Georgia. At the same time, Abkhaz

militias blocked the Galidzga bridge (in Ochamchira) and the first secretary of the Ochamchira district, Sergey Bagapsh (who would later become Abkhazia's second *de facto* president), mobilised Abkhaz from Tkvarcheli in their support. The clashes ended with the arrival of the Soviet troops (2014, 145–46).

The violent clashes were a turning point for inter-ethnic relations. For many, this was the time when nationality suddenly crept into their lives and began to matter. According to Nino (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 131), a Georgian woman from a mixed village in the Ochamchira region, "[t]he first time we were forced to think about [nationality] was after the events in 1989." Most strikingly, society became increasingly segregated. Dzhulietta (2006, 6), a Georgian woman married to an Abkhaz man, remembers: "In 1989 the situation got heated. In our family it was not noticeable, but around us there were talks, which were seeding animosity between Georgians and Abkhaz, people started to group according to nationality, stopped trusting each other." This was even noticeable at ceremonies that previously formed the backbone of good neighbourly relations in ethnically mixed areas, such as weddings and funerals. An Abkhaz woman (Dina) from Ochamchira who had studied in Tbilisi reports (2006, 27):

> After the first clashes in the year of 1989, the tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz were already noticeable, especially at the funerals. If previously there were no problems and everyone was standing together, then now Abkhaz were standing separately and Georgians separately. This is difficult to explain, there were no brawls and scandals, but people started to be afraid. If somebody wanted to go there and stand nearby, then he would already worry that he would be judged by somebody else.

According to Dina (2006, 27), segregation also took place in the workplace, another key site of social integration. There, "the collective was divided into two halves: Abkhazians separately, Georgians separately." Lolita (2006, 77), a Georgian woman married to an Abkhaz man, remembers:

> To me and my family, the first clashes of the year of 1989 were more shocking than the beginning of the war in 1992. In 1992, there were already some conditions conducive to clashes, but in 1989 – that was like a slap in the face. [...] My husband then worked for *Gruzenergo* and he was the only Abkhaz at work. All of his colleagues were often at our house, we were friends, and when the events of 1989 started, it happened that he ended up as a castaway, he was not allowed to go to work, was threatened. [...] But then somehow everything got settled, he went to work, but the relations were cold.

For mixed families, the situation was particularly difficult. It became common to avoid sensitive topics in order to maintain peaceful relations. For instance, Maia, an Abkhaz woman married to a Georgian, remembers that "[a]t the time of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, when the situation was tense, in our home there were no disagreements and no conflicts on national grounds. [...] My husband and I understood each other well and would not have destroyed the family because of politics. We always tried to avoid sensitive questions carefully." (2006, 61). However, this was more difficult for those involved in politics. Eka's husband, for example, worked for the newspaper published by *Aidgylara*, the Abkhaz national movement. When her parents died, relations between her brothers – who supported the demonstrations organised by local Georgians – and her husband became difficult. She (2006, 65–66) remembers the discussions they had:

> We tried to somehow influence my brothers, brought historical examples, but it was all without results. I told them: "See, after all we have our native village in Imereti [region in Western Georgia]. This is our land and the land of our ancestors. There our grandfather and father were born and your children have the land of their ancestors. And my children don't have another land, except for Abkhazia. That is their land. And you would like to argue that they don't have the right to their land."

One of the consequences of the July clashes was that it became more common to openly show hostility. According to Eka (2006, 66), "[a]fter the clashes in 1989, everything started to get worse. On the streets people looked with an arrogant grin at those who spoke Abkhaz, like at second-class people. The neighbours started to kick us out of the house, when my husband received a uniform and weapon at work to guard objects. At some point the patience of the Abkhaz had to burst and it burst." Since the official investigation of the events in July was carried out by the Georgian Prosecutor's office, it was largely Abkhaz who were blamed for the violence (Shesterinina 2014, 147; see also Lezhava 1997, 258). Demanding that the investigation should be moved to the centre in Moscow, the Abkhaz national movement started to prepare a large-scale workers' strike. Beginning in early August in Tkvarcheli, the strike mobilised an unprecedented proportion of the Abkhaz population, including people from all layers of society, and ended only when the demand to transfer the investigation was finally met (Shesterinina 2014, 150–52).

However, after July 1989, no more large-scale clashes occurred in Abkhazia. But even though order was largely re-established, as both groups pursued contradictory goals – the Georgian elites the secession from the Soviet Union and the Abkhaz elites to be upgraded to a Federal Republic *within* the Soviet Union – tensions continued to exist and even intensified on the political level. This happened not in the form of physical violence, but a so-called "war of laws". In February 1990, the Georgian government passed a resolution annulling Soviet laws. In response, on August 25, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet unilaterally raised Abkhazia's status to that of a union republic.[43] The session, which was attended by 72 out of 138 deputies and boycotted by the rest, caused the Supreme Soviet to split into an Abkhaz and a Georgian fraction (Hewitt 2013, 91).

In October the same year, Gamsakhurdia won the elections and became president of Georgia. This reinforced existing fears among the Abkhaz population as well as other non-Georgian minorities. According to Coppieters (2004, 197–98), Gamsakhurdia's election as president and the declaration of independence that followed on 9 April 1991 "were regarded by the Abkhaz and Ossetian communities as a threat. They feared that now that it had emancipated itself from the control of the Moscow authorities, the Georgian leadership would be able to suppress the rights of the titular nations of the autonomous entities in Georgia." These fears were further exacerbated by the decision of the Georgian parliament to revoke the autonomous status of South Ossetia in December 1990 (2004, 198).

The Abkhaz bloc, on the other hand, chose to participate in the March 17 all-union referendum, in which the majority of those who voted – mostly non-Georgians – opted for the preservation of the Soviet Union as a "renewed federation of equal sovereign republics" (Tishkov 1997, 50). Authorities in Tbilisi had boycotted the referendum and on April 9, 1991, Georgia declared the restoration of the independence of Georgia and therefore its secession from the Soviet Union. But despite the increasing confrontation and chauvinistic propaganda, Gamsakhurdia nevertheless managed to avoid an escalation of the situation in Abkhazia and instead reached a power-sharing agreement with the Abkhazian leadership that involved a reform of the electoral system.[44] According to this deal, ethnic Abkhazians would

---

[43] According to Hewitt (2013, 90–91), this was not a declaration of independence.
[44] According to Kaufman (2001, 118), "[t]he Abkhaz view is that Shevardnadze interfered more in Abkhazian affairs than did Gamsakhurdia, which increased tensions in the relationship."

receive 28 seats, Georgians 26 seats, and other groups (mostly Armenians and Russians) 11 seats (Zürcher 2007, 130).

However, the Gamsakhurdia government soon collapsed and the deal did not hold.[45] In addition to the war in South Ossetia, which began in November 1989 following the appeal of the South Ossetian Regional Soviet to raise the status of South Ossetia from autonomous oblast (AO) to autonomous republic (ASSR), in the winter of 1991/1992, a civil war was sparked within Georgia as a consequence of the rivalry between the supporters of Gamsakhurdia and Tengiz Kitovani, the leader of the "National Guard", a so-called "proto-army" (Baev 2003, 131).[46] After the putsch in Moscow in August 1991, Gamsakhurdia agreed to put the Georgian National Guard under the control of the Soviet Interior Ministry and disarm the forces. However, Kitovani refused to follow the order and give up his power over the guard and decided instead to withdraw his troops. Gamsakhurdia became increasingly isolated and on December 22, 1991, when around 500 soldiers besieged the parliamentary building, he fled to Armenia (Zürcher 2007, 126–27). After Gamsakhurdia was defeated and forced to flee, a new Georgian State Council was founded under the leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze, who had served as a minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union until the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991. In March 1992, the State Council decided to replace the 1978 Constitution with the pre-Soviet Constitution from 1921, in which Abkhazia's autonomy was not legally specified (see chapter 2). As a response, the Abkhazian parliament (in the absence of the Georgian parliamentarians) reinstated its draft constitution from 1925, according to which Abkhazia was a sovereign state – within the confines of the Soviet Union (Coppieters 2004, 130).[47]

Consequently, for Abkhaz elites, the priority was to be independent from Georgia, not from the Soviet supra-state. As Beissinger (2004, 224) has noted, "Abkhaz nationalism […] differed qualitatively from the separatism then growing elsewhere in the USSR in that it formed a countermovement to Georgian separatism." According to Zürcher (2007, 144), "the national project of […] the Abkhaz was not so much defined by what they wanted to become but, rather, by what they did not want

---

[45] For a more detailed discussion of why the agreement did not hold, see Zürcher (2007, 130).
[46] The formation of the National Guard was a consequence of a law declaring the conscription of Georgians into the Soviet army illegal that was adopted by the Georgian Parliament in November 1990. In January 1991, legislation was approved that authorised the establishment of a 12,000-strong alternative military unit (what became the National Guard) (Baev 2003, 131).
[47] For more details on the parliamentary dynamics, see Kaufman (2001, 118).

to be: a minority group within a rapidly nationalizing Georgia". But others have pointed out that Abkhaz representatives did not want strict separation from Georgia either; as Coppieters (2000, 24) noted, by reinstating the constitution of 1925, which mentioned treaty relations with Georgia, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet "did not declare independence, but strove for the re-establishment of equal treaty relations with Georgia in some kind of federative arrangement."

4.2. August 1992: The arrival of (para-)military troops and the outbreak of war

In the perestroika period, both political and personal boundaries became more rigid. Growing disputes concerning the legitimate ownership of Abkhazia began to stir inter-personal and inter-ethnic conflict and the population became increasingly divided along ethnic lines. Yet, at the same time, no large-scale violence occurred after July 1989; therefore, when on 14 August 1992 Georgian troops entered Abkhazia, this – and the war that would follow – still came as a shock to many. In the period before the war, both Georgians and ethnic Abkhazians had already begun to militarise. The first armed group to appear in Abkhazia were the *Mkhedrioni* (Georgian for "horsemen"), who were mostly active in Gagra (Shesterinina 2014, 154). According to Zürcher (2007, 123), they were "a loosely organized paramilitary grouping that successfully combined national-patriotic symbols and rhetoric with lucrative criminal entrepreneurship." The *Mkhedrioni* were founded by the playwright (and former bank robber) Jaba Ioseliani and were active across Georgia. In Abkhazia, the Abkhaz responded with the formation of the "Abkhaz Guard" (Shesterinina 2014, 154).[48]

The war began only a few weeks after Abkhazia was declared sovereign by the (pro-) Abkhaz bloc in the parliament, which suggests that the military intervention was a necessary response to Abkhaz separatism. But according to Baev (2003, 138), "[t]hat demonstrative move might have passed without serious repercussions". In fact, negotiations were still going on between Georgian and Abkhaz delegations. Hewitt (2013, 125) explains that

> [i]n Sukhum on 13 August, Zurab Achba led an Abkhazian delegation in talks with Georgian parliamentarians on future relations between Tbilisi

---

[48] Despite the mobilisation, violence remained limited to low-scale brawls (Shesterinina 2014, 154).

and Sukhum. The following day, Shamba's draft-treaty (in its various redraftings) was to be debated by the Supreme Soviet. But this discussion never took place, for early that next morning K'it'ovanis's National Guard crossed the Ingur and headed for Sukhum; a sea-borne assault to the north saw Georgian troops landing near Gagra.

Two official reasons have been put forward as to why the troops entered Abkhazia. Allegedly, one mission was to protect the railway lines against so-called "Zviadists" (the supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia), who had been robbing trains along the railway line running from Russia to Georgia (e.g. Hewitt 2013, 125). Another declared aim was to free several Georgian officials who had been kidnapped and were supposedly being held hostage in the Gali region.[49] Yet, doubts have been raised as to whether it was necessary to send a whole army into Abkhazia to safeguard the railway, and whether the troops had to move further than Gali if the goal was to free the hostages.[50] According to Kaufman (2001, 120), "[t]his behaviour shows that the Georgian explanations were a smokescreen: one does not use tanks and armored cars to police a dead rail line, and there was never any claim that the hostages were being held west of Sukhumi, so the armored assault on Sukhumi could only have been meant as an attempt to secure control of Abkhazia by military means."[51] There has also been speculation as to whether it was Shevardnadze who sent the troops or whether Kitovani went ahead without Shevardnadze's explicit approval.[52]

Abkhaz journalist Vitalii Sharia (1993, 2), described the first day of the war as follows:

> The day of 14 August 1992 began in Abkhazia similar to the previous ones: just like the day before, the hot sun was shining and thousands of holidaymakers filled the beaches from the morning, another shift started

---

[49] Among the kidnapped were deputy-premier Aleksandre Kavasadze, Shevardnadze's national security adviser and interior minister Roman Gventsadze, who had travelled to Zugdidi to negotiate Kavasadze's release (Hewitt 2013, 125).

[50] According to Kaufman (2001, 120), "instead of searching for hostages, the bulk of the Georgian troops – accompanied by armored vehicles – stayed on the main road, arrested the head of administration of the city of Ochamchira, skirmished with Abkhaz outside the city, and drove straight to Sukhumi."

[51] According to Jurij Anchabadze (1999, 139–40), "[o]fficially the excuse for the invasion seemed wholly plausible, namely 'defence of the railway.' However, confident of success, Shevardnadze's entourage did not conceal that the main aim of the military operation was the overthrow of Ardzinba, the suppression of the Supreme Soviet they found so objectionable, the establishing of political control over Abkhazia, and the liquidation of its autonomous statehood."

[52] In the documentary *Absence of Will* (Studio Re 2009), Shevardnadze stated that "Kitovani, the defence minister, should never have sent troops to Sukhumi. That was our biggest mistake." He added: "I was head of the state council at that time, but I wasn't in control of the national guard."

at the enterprises, leaves were being collected at the tea plantations in the villages [...] Few people in the republic suspected that the implementation of the military operation "sword" that had been developed in Tbilisi began at that time.[53]

On August 12, troops were first sent to neighbouring Mingrelia. On the morning of 14 August, they crossed the Inguri river into Abkhazia and later continued to move westwards.[54] Around midday, the tanks arrived at the central square in the town of Ochamchira, which caused confusion among the local population. According to Sharia (1993, 3), "the locals gathered in small groups and argued among themselves about what it was [that was going on]: manoeuvers, a military parade or the shooting of a film – several bearded Georgian guardsmen [...] in sleeveless leather jackets and black glasses climbed onto the roof of the building of the district administration, ripped off the national flag of Republic of Abkhazia, triumphantly broke it and trampled and throw it down". Simultaneously, a second part of the army moved in the direction of Sukhumi, where they united with local Georgian formations, but were stopped by Abkhaz militia at the Red Bridge outside the city centre.

The events caused great confusion, chaos and panic among the population, including Abkhaz and Georgians, who could not immediately make sense of what was happening. An Abkhaz woman (Rima) remembers:

> On 13 August, we gathered our cattle and were in the mountains. Our bull ate a rope, fell ill and had to be slaughtered. He weighed 300kg and we brought the meat to the market. On the 14th, I was trading at the market when suddenly a woman comes running and starts to shout in Georgian that the war has begun. We thought she was going crazy. It turned out that she was on the Red Bridge and saw the tanks. I had about 100kg of leftover meat, there was money lying under the tablecloth, but who thought about it ... My daughter and I dropped everything and ran. *Georgians and Abkhaz all ran in the same direction, no one knew what had happened.* And on the street, people were running and getting on any bus, just to get out of there. While we were getting out of the market, six guys came with machine guns and began to shoot in the air, to disperse people in order to take their money. People fled in panic, who was thinking about money! [...] We came to the station on foot and I was thinking, "Where should we go?" [...] We decided to go to my parents in Eshera [village west of Sukhumi]. We caught the bus to Gagra, I looked around: *both Georgians and Abkhazians are sitting together and everyone is running in the same direction.* [...] On the second day, I got onto a military car and went to my

---

[53] Several of my interlocutors remembered that there were still tourists in Abkhazia, but less so than before the first clashes.

[54] The first unsuccessful Abkhaz resistance took place 30 km into Abkhazia at the village Okhurei in the Ochamchira district (Sharia 1993, 2).

husband to the mountains. When I told them what happened to us, they started laughing: "What are you making up! What war already! Georgians and Abkhaz always sat together, stood together at the market, and you say "war". Neither the Georgians there nor the Abkhaz knew that the war had begun. (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 91–92; emphasis added)

At that point it was not clear how long the military confrontation would possibly last. For instance, one of my close informants, back then a father of two small children, was convinced that the crisis would soon be resolved, just like in July 1989.[55] In the beginning, there was chaos and uncertainty; the course of events was not yet set and no clear narrative was established. Instead of dividing along ethnic lines, people were running in the same direction, as Rima's testimony illustrates.[56] Even officials, including Ardzinba himself, were caught by surprise. The Abkhaz deputy Natella Akaba told HRW (1995, 18–19): "On August 14, I was in the parliament building in Sukhumi. Around 11 a.m. we got a call. They said that a huge line of tanks had entered Ochamchira region. [A fellow deputy] didn't believe it because he had had a very friendly conversation with Shevardnadze. We completely did not expect this turn of events."

However, around noon, Vladislav Ardzinba gave an emergency television address which significantly influenced the framing of events as a Georgian aggression and existential threat both to ethnic Abkhazians and Abkhazia's multinational population as a whole.[57] He said: "Our land was invaded by the armed forces of the State Council of Georgia, among whom are the criminal elements that spread death and destruction... The Abkhaz and the entire population of our long-suffering country is being added to the blood spilled by [Georgia's] government" (Ardzinba 2004, 5, cited in Shesterinina 2014, 191). The same day, the High Council issued a resolution that urged all Abkhazians to mobilise (Shesterinina 2014, 191).

---

[55] This contact told me that when a boat arrived to evacuate Russians living in Abkhazia, they were not sure what to do and decided to stay (or, more accurately, while they were trying to figure out what to do, the boat left). If they had known that this was the beginning of a war that would drag on for a bit over a year, they would have left immediately.

[56] Scott Straus (2006, 88) made a similar observation in the context of the genocide in Rwanda, where, when the violence was beginning to unfold, "[i]nsecurity and uncertainty prevailed, but in many areas Hutus and Tutsis had not yet divided, and often they jointly patrolled their communities, trying to prevent any trouble or violence."

[57] Ardzinba became particularly popular as the Abkhaz leader after his 1989 speech at the 1st People's Deputies Congress in Moscow, where he set out the Abkhaz perspective on the events around the Lykhny gathering (which was increasingly blamed for the 9 April tragedy in Tbilisi), outlining the various historical injustices that the Abkhaz had experienced (Shesterinina 2014, 141). The text can be found in Marykhuba (1994, 463–68).

On the night from 14 to 15 August, soldiers entered Gagra from the sea and the town was soon taken by Georgian troops. Sukhumi came under full Georgian control on 18 August, when fighters took down the Abkhaz flag and replaced it with a Georgian one (Sharia 1993, 39). On 19 August, Kitovani announced that the whole territory of Abkhazia was now under Georgian control with the exception of the town of Gudauta and its surroundings (HRW 1995, 21).[58] By that time, most Abkhaz officials had already retreated to Gudauta west of Sukhumi to prepare for counter-mobilisation.

4.3. Ethnicity as a script for violence: the disintegration of an "inter-national" community

At the beginning of the conflict, ethnic Abkhazians were indeed the main victims and the majority of Sukhumi's Abkhaz residents – with the exception of many elderly people – fled the city over the course of a few weeks. According to HRW (1995, 21), "[w]ithin days after Sukhumi was taken by Georgian National Guard troops [...] a pattern of vicious, ethnically based pillage, looting, assault, and murder emerged." A young Abkhaz refugee told HRW:

> On September 13, Georgian guardsmen came to my neighbors on the ninth floor. I live on the sixth floor. They were yelling, so I heard everything. They said: "Give us your gold!" My Georgian neighbors went up to them and said: "Why are you doing this?" They answered: "They are Abkhaz and we can do what we like." The next morning I left. I was unable to leave earlier because of my child, who is nine. I left everything behind. I took just a small bag with the bare necessities for the child. Mkhedrioni would drive around at night and shoot out the windows. They would yell: "Abkhaz!...This is your death!" They would [also] go out on the balconies and just throw things off: crystal, dishware, [you name it]. (1995, 22)

Similarly, an Abkhazian woman (Nato) married to a Georgian man remembered how the Mkhedrioni were looking for ethnic Abkhazians: "They came to our yard and began to ask: 'Where do the Abkhaz live here?' My knowledge of Georgian helped me and I told them that there are no Abkhaz on our street. At night I didn't sleep at all, I sat and prayed with my child in my arms, [...] thinking: 'Why do we, ordinary people,

---

[58] Another exception was the mining town of Tkvarcheli.

suffer so much? I am Abkhaz, my son is Georgian, what have we done wrong?'" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 73).

Identity-based abuse was facilitated by the Soviet practice of passport nationality. According to HRW (1995, 5), "[i]n a typical scenario, [...] a man would be stopped on the street by armed men and asked his identity or place of residence. If he identified himself as from an enemy group, the men would humiliate, threaten and beat him with fists and rifle butts."[59] One of my close Abkhaz contacts told me how, when he briefly returned to Sukhumi to look after his parents, he was constantly afraid of being checked by Georgian soldiers. He told me the following anecdote: One day, his neighbour rang the doorbell and asked him to look after his dog while he was leaving the city. He reluctantly agreed; however, he soon realised that whenever he was walking the dog, no one was stopping him to check his documents, because, as he explained laughing, no one expected an Abkhaz man to walk around the city with a dog.

Others were not so lucky. For example, an Abkhaz man from Sukhumi reported the following incident: "At the end of September 1992, Georgian guardsmen stopped me at the central department store and demanded my passport. When they saw that 'Abkhaz' was written as my nationality, they were very happy and led me to the coast where the breakwater was. They put me on the edge of the breakwater and practiced shooting. A Mingrelian who was randomly passing by managed to convince the guards to let me go" (quoted in Sharia 1993, 91). However, a month later, when he was once again asked to show his passport, he was beaten to unconsciousness and woke up in a puddle with all his money stolen.

This eyewitness account also illustrates that cases of inter-ethnic solidarity continued to exist, although Georgians who tried to help Abkhaz risked becoming targets themselves, for the fighters did not shy away from attacking "their own". While Abkhaz were usually the *first* targets of violence and plunder, members of other nationalities, including Georgians, also became victims. According to one eyewitness, "[d]uring the looting in Abkhazia's occupied territory there was no 'national discrimination', even though they usually started with the Abkhazians, [but] their favourite object of plunder were the Armenians" (1993, 85–86).[60] Similarly, an Abkhaz woman from Ochamchira remembered: "When the Mkhedrioni

---

[59] As the HRW report stresses, this technique was used by both Georgian and Abkhaz forces.
[60] According to this witness, it was mostly money and gold that was taken from Armenians.

arrived, the Abkhaz began to hide and leave [...]. They were persecuted, killed. I know one Abkhazian family of five people that the Mkhedrioni people burned [...]. Everyone saw that they were bandits and drug addicts, for whom nationality was only a pretext for robbery. *They also robbed, killed, raped their own*" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 7; emphasis added).

This indicates that nationalism was not the only and not always the dominant motive. According to an Abkhaz eyewitness from Sukhumi, Georgian guardsmen once went to the house of his Mingrelian neighbour and asked for money. When he refused, "they tied his wife, took off his clothes and, heating an iron, burnt his whole body" (Sharia 1993, 88). Three days later he died. Even Georgian nationalists could become victims of pillage. For example, one witness mentions the case of a *Sukhumchanin* and ardent nationalist "who, like many other Georgian patriots loved to argue that the Abkhaz were not supposed to have any statehood, that they had been 'spoiled', etc" (1993, 88). One day, it is said, he got into an argument with a group of Abkhaz and threatened them, but – according to the witness – "the next day the unforeseen happened: the Georgian guards came and took his car. Later the car was, in fact, returned, but they beat him to the point that they broke the teeth of the upper jaw and removed them; with them the gold crowns" (1993, 88). More often, however, Georgians who became targets of intimidation and violence were those who had close ties with Abkhaz and could therefore be seen as their "allies". For instance, two young neighbours – one Abkhaz, one Mingrelian – who went from Ochamchira to the village of Mokva are reported to have been stopped by a group of guardsmen. When they found out that one was Abkhaz, they killed him brutally and then shot the Mingrelian in the leg, "just because he was with an Abkhaz", as an eyewitness put it (1993, 90). Hence, he was considered to be "guilty by association".

One of the reasons why the troops behaved so ruthlessly was that even though they claimed to restore "order" and "territorial integrity", they themselves did not act under any central control (HRW 1995, 5, 25). According to Sharia (1993, 84), "[a]ctually, it was difficult to call this an army: some military formations did not submit to a single command and often started fights between themselves because of the 'division of the territory'." Furthermore, many of the fighters were, in fact, prisoners who had been released on the condition of fighting in Abkhazia (HRW 1995, 25). This means that many had a history of violence and had therefore already been desensitised to violent behaviour. Eyewitness accounts also suggest that there

was a significant number of drug addicts among the fighters, which is also likely to have contributed to uncontrolled violent behaviour.[61]

A refugee from Ochamchira remembered how one of the guardsmen boasted: "We did not come here to serve, but to 'work'. We do not obey anyone: neither Shevardnadze, nor Kitovani ... Let them just try to stop us from robbing – we will immediately turn around and leave" (Sharia 1993, 84). Although Shevardnadze connected the paramilitary forces to the state, presenting the National Guard as the official army and the *Mkhedrioni* as the interior forces (Baev 2003, 133), the funds provided by the Georgian government were extremely limited. The National Guard was based on volunteers using their own weapons and who "had to rely on these weapons to feed themselves" (2003, 131). In order to finance their operations, the paramilitary organisations depended on taxation of the shadow economy; according to Baev (2003, 138), "the main cause of the war was gaining control over the highly profitable 'shadow' economy", including the tourist industry and the agricultural sector. The material presented here certainly testifies to greed as an important motivational force among the Georgian troops.

Another important factor, it seems, was that many of the fighters were from outside of Abkhazia, i.e. "external Georgians", with little pre-war exposure to ethnic Abkhazians or the vernacular culture more broadly. It is possible that this made it easier for them to "dehumanise" and collectively label them as enemies.[62] But potentially they were not able to neatly identify with the local Mingrelians either, which could explain some of the intra-Georgian violence. First of all, they distinguished themselves both culturally and especially linguistically from other Georgian sub-groups or regions, such as Kakheti – where many of the fighters were from – and were in many ways culturally closer to the Abkhaz. Second, among the Mingrelians in Abkhazia there were many supporters of Gamsakhurdia (the so-called "Zviadists"), who had only recently been ousted as a president by Kitovani, the leader of the National Guard. Therefore, although they shared their opposition towards Abkhazian sovereignty, internally the Georgians were far from a unified bloc. For example, one of my close Abkhaz contacts told me that when the war broke out, a Mingrelian warned him that the guardsmen had already entered the town of Ochamchira, not far from their village. When he asked him how he could possibly

---

[61] According to Sharia (1993, 85), many hospitals and pharmacies were raided in search of drugs.
[62] Dehumanisation is a common strategy in conflict that helps to delegitimise the enemy (see, e.g., Bar-Tal 2013, 181).

trust his information, thinking that this might be a trap, the man replied: "I am a Mingrelian, *but I am also a Zviadist!*"

Yet, violence also took on more intimate forms. Although many Abkhaz could not understand why Georgians who had never lived in Abkhazia came there to fight and defend "their" homeland, the involvement of local Georgians was even more shocking. According to HRW (1995, 22), the majority of fighters came from outside of Abkhazia, but "many local Georgians proved to be among the most stubborn and cruel fighters on the Georgian side." The support of the troops by local Georgians – and especially neighbours – was not only unsettling because, from the perspective of many Abkhaz, their historical roots were clearly somewhere else, but also because of the close pre-war relations. One woman remembered: "Nobody believed that the war would drag on for so long. We thought that the local Georgians will help [us]. It is clear that they, too, were afraid of their own, many were forced to take arms against their will, but it was very painful and offensive for me that despite such multiple family ties (we had a lot of mixed Georgian-Abkhaz families), they did not help us" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 108).

According to another eyewitness, "[i]t was scary to see these tanks and armoured vehicles, and our neighbours greeted them with flowers, brought them food ... We grew up together: there was horror in my eyes, and there was joy in their eyes. It was a tragedy!" (2006, 76). Despite the increasing polarisation of society and impact of nationalist propaganda in the period leading up to the war, many Abkhaz still expected that the Georgians would stand up together with the Abkhaz against the "intruders" and force them to retreat. This expectation shows how, regardless of the tensions, many people still counted on a long-standing history of social ties. This is very similar to what Lee Ann Fujii (2009, 93; emphasis added) observed in Rwanda, where cross-ethnic neighbourly solidarity was expected despite existing animosities:

> *[t]he norm was not to see people as Hutu or Tutsi first and neighbors second. The norm was to see neighbors who were Hutu or Tutsi.* Murderous behaviour toward people of a given ethnic group violated people's canonical expectations of what constituted normal behavior. Contrary to the assumptions of the ethnic hatred and ethnic fear theses, neither Tutsi nor Hutu expected their neighbors and friends to line up with their ethnic groups even under the pressures of war and mass violence. Instead, people expected their friends and neighbors to continue to play the role of friends and neighbors – that is, they expected their Hutu neighbors to protect, not hurt, them.

In the case of Abkhazia, this expectation also demonstrates how little understanding there was for the concern and grievances of the Georgian population living in Abkhazia (and vice versa) and how they contributed to intimate forms of violence. Although it is often assumed that dehumanisation is a consequence of the social distance between groups, research has shown that cruel acts of violence are, in fact, more often committed by people who are close.[63] How could violence be committed by those who had been living side-by-side with ethnic Abkhazians for several decades? As I have shown earlier, by that time anti-Abkhaz resentment had grown strong among Georgians in Abkhazia. HRW (1995, 23) suggests that there were clearly Georgians who sharply resented the concessions made to the Abkhaz, such as the latest agreement under Gamsakhurdia which secured an Abkhaz majority in the local parliament: "The ethnic Abkhaz had exercised that majority, in the view of the local Georgians, to oppress the non-Abkhaz. Clearly, there were political scores to settle in Sukhumi, not the least of which was, in the eyes of many local Georgians, to prove that Sukhumi was subordinate to Tbilisi." As one witness remarked, "I believe that when there was war, and people were shooting each other, they were angry and set to do so. There were people who suffered in peacetime, became embittered and then did precisely that" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 15). For those who were resentful or "fed up", the outbreak of war possibly provided an opportunity to vent their anger or frustration, whether it was politically motivated or personal.

However, not all Georgians wished to participate in the violence. For instance, a Georgian woman married to an Abkhaz man remembers how her brother-in-law attempted to escape:

> My sister, who lived in Agudzera, had a Georgian husband. When the war began, he was hiding so that he would not be forced to take up arms. He was friends with my husband and did not want to fight against him. Unfortunately, he left after the war. This also happened; not all Georgians took up arms and went to war against the Abkhazians. And even many of those who took up arms were not nationalists. *When the crowd goes, it is very difficult to swim against the stream*. (2006, 79; emphasis added)

---

[63] See, for instance, Hessick (2007, 344–45).

There was, in fact, significant intra-Georgian social pressure for able-bodied adult men to participate in the fighting. Some people, as the excerpt suggests, tried to hide. Others, however, gave in to the pressure, even though my material indicates that some sought to at least avoid active involvement and tried to support the troops in more indirect ways instead. But in addition to those who were hiding and those who followed the masses, perhaps due to peer pressure and threats against them, there were many others who left Abkhazia in different directions. According to one witness (Sharia 1993, 94), "[i]n the very first days of the war, the most sensible part of the urban and rural Georgians left Abkhazia for Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov, Krasnodar, Sochi, Batumi, Western Georgia … They did not want to take part in the extermination of the Abkhaz, especially since many are related to them. Among them were those who risked their lives, hid the Abkhaz and helped them to leave."

There were, indeed, numerous cases of inter-ethnic solidarity, even though trying to help members of the "enemy" group was a risky endeavour. In fact, as noted earlier, being associated with someone Abkhaz could reflect badly on a Georgian person and Georgians living among Abkhaz were thus not spared from violence principally targeted at Abkhaz. For example, a Georgian woman married to an Abkhaz man remembers that she went to the village of her mother- and brother-in-law (who had little children) when the war began: "I said that I would defend them, that they wouldn't do anything to me, a Georgian. *But during those difficult times they did not start to distinguish whether you are Abkhaz or Georgian; if you live among Abkhaz, then you are an Abkhaz*" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 45; emphasis added). Lee Ann Fujii (2009, 101) has referred to this phenomenon as the "logic of contamination". Based on the assumption that one's social environment is powerfully transformative, it goes beyond the notion of guilt of association: "Rather, it [...] assumes that no one person will – or indeed can – remain differentiated from those around her. It assumes that people are influenced by those around them and thus will inevitably take on the beliefs and attitudes of others" (2009, 101).

An Abkhaz woman who had married a Svan and moved to the Kodori valley remembers the polarisation and mistrust that gradually emerged among locals:

> Before the war, Svans and Abkhazians lived in harmony, and when the war started, they agreed [...] that they would not shoot at each other, but then, after provocations, people from both sides had to take up arms. In Azhara, the Abkhazians were no longer trusted, they began to look at me suspiciously, accused me of treason, once an anonymous letter was

thrown into our home, demanding that I leave [...]. My husband, for my sake, said: "Let's take the children and leave together. If something happens to you, I will take revenge, and in return they will avenge me. Why do I need a place where we all will be destroyed." (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 85)

Regardless of the fact that she was married to a Svan, this Abkhaz woman was perceived as a security threat because of her Abkhaz ethnicity. This illustrates that the logic of contamination is complex and situational. The question is: If people are influenced by their environment, who is influenced by whom in mixed marriages? While a woman married to a Georgian man is assumed to be first and foremost influenced by her husband, it cannot be excluded that she is also sympathetic to her Abkhaz relatives. Her somewhat ambiguous background thus caused insecurity on both sides.

Moreover, even if a person proved his or her trust one day, there was no guarantee that this behaviour would remain stable. Ethnic warfare creates conditions under which people's behaviour can change rapidly, especially as people become more agitated through stories and rumours of violence. It seems that for many, leaving became the only option warranting their security. For example, an Abkhaz woman living among Georgians remembered: "When the Mkhedrioni troops entered our courtyard for the first time, they began pulling out cars, checking apartments, selecting things. [...] At first, the neighbours did not give away that I was Abkhaz, they called me "Georgian Abkhazian", *but when the emotions began running high*, my husband himself suggested that I and the children should leave" (2006, 99; emphasis added).

The longer the war went on, the more people belonging to the enemy group became a risk not only to themselves but also to the people who surround them and who would risk their lives if they sought to protect them. As another Abkhaz woman recalled: "Seeing the distrust towards me in the eyes of my neighbour, I understood, 'Lord, this cannot be stopped anymore ...' The Georgian neighbours asked me to leave, fearing that they would not be able to protect me. After all, the war has its own laws! *We, the ordinary people, were just victims of a big game*" (2006, 75; emphasis added). Whether people wanted to look at each other in terms of ethnicity or not no longer mattered; once the war unfolded, they no longer had a choice but to think in terms of ethnicity.

4.4. Abkhaz mobilisation and the expulsion of the Georgian population

From the very beginning, ethnic Abkhazians showed fierce resistance against what they saw as a Georgian invasion and many were determined to defend their "land" against "foreign" intruders. However, those who were fighting were not necessarily ardent nationalists or primarily motivated by more abstract ideas of a "homeland". During my fieldwork people would often explain to me that they took up arms because they had to defend "their house", which was synonymous with defending their family, or "their village". There was a sense that since they were the ones to be attacked, they did not have a choice but to defend the lives of those around them. Security and self-defence thus played an important role; similar to what Straus (2006, 172) observed in Rwanda, "[m]en killed because they thought they were in combat. They killed to win the war [...] and to protect themselves. The aim was 'security' in a context of acute insecurity."

But while it was not necessarily "hatred" towards Georgians that initially mobilised fighters, the violence targeted at the Abkhaz population and the stories and rumours about it induced highly negative feelings even where they had not existed before. As one eyewitness remarked, "[a]fter what the National Guard, the Mkhedrioni and parts of the Georgian population had done, *Georgians became the first enemies in the eyes of the Abkhaz*" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 123; emphasis added). Given the small size of the Abkhaz population and the strong family networks among its members, there was hardly anyone who had not been personally affected by violence; but even those who had been spared from attacks were still under the influence of stories of mass killings and rapes that were spreading fast. As Rajmohan Ramanathapillai (2006, 1) has noted in the context of Sri Lanka, stories about traumatic events can create a new ethnic consciousness and are thus "a powerful symbol and an effective tool to create new combatants".[64]

Consequently, the initial antagonistic collective categorisation of all Abkhaz as belonging to an abstract enemy and the violence committed against them as part of it had a spiralling effect in that it triggered an even stronger antagonistic collective categorisation of Georgians as the enemy by the Abkhaz. In his work on a series of local massacres among neighbours in a village along today's Croatian-Bosnian border, Max Bergholz (2016, 112) has described antagonistic collective

---

[64] For the role of rumours, see Tishkov (1995); Horowitz (2001, 87); Bergholz (2016, chap. 3).

categorisation as "the process whereby in moments during, and especially immediately following, acts of intercommunal violence, people can rapidly reconfigure their views of neighbors by suddenly categorizing and subsuming them as parts of a much larger enemy collectivity." My material suggests that this was also the case in Abkhazia. The more ethnicity became securitised, the more people became regarded as the embodiment of their nation and the less individual loyalties and past behaviour seemed to matter. This is illustrated by the following statement by a Georgian woman from Gudauta, whose Abkhaz family members were fighting *against* the Georgian troops:

> At the time when my son was on the frontline, I was in Gudauta [under Abkhaz control]. Before the war I worked there and people knew me very well. Once when I was queuing for bread, they started pushing me out, saying that I was Georgian. It was very disappointing. With tears, I tried to explain that my husband was Abkhaz, [that] my son is fighting for his people, for Abkhazia. *But no one wanted to hear it, for these women it was only important that I was Georgian.*[65] I came to terms with it, because that was their right – the Georgians attacked Abkhazia, brought war, killed children. (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 30; emphasis added)

The images and stories of massacres especially of those who were perceived as intrinsically innocent – such as women and children – significantly contributed to the spread of antagonistic collective categorisation and triggered a desire for revenge that became an important tool for mobilisation.[66] The first significant act of retaliation took place in early October 1992, when Abkhaz forces gained control over Gagra in a fierce battle that caused the flight of thousands of Georgians. According to HRW (1995, 26), "[t]heir flight was the mirror image of the flight of Abkhaz refugees in August when Georgian forces seized Gagra. Unsurprisingly, the violations of human rights in October matched those in August. Many fighters on the Abkhaz side were Abkhaz refugees who had fled Georgian forces earlier, and it is evident from refugee accounts that they took revenge for what they themselves had been forced to endure." Eyewitnesses interviewed by HRW also mentioned the participation of volunteers on the Abkhazian side, including Cossacks and Chechens, many of which

---

[65] This remark points to the important – but often underexplored – role of women in "stirring up" conflict by non-violent means (see Helms 2010, 21).
[66] As Bergholz (2016, 154) noted in his own study, the "experience of listening to atrocity stories bonded the fighters, both by creating feelings of fear and a sense of common suffering due to their perceived ethnicity, which most likely helped to cement a desire among many for revenge along ethnic lines."

were accused of looting (1995, 27). These events, in turn, fuelled the desire for revenge on the part of the Georgian troops.

As HRW (1995, 22) noted, given the multi-ethnic composition of the population, "both Georgian and Abkhaz forces were operating among both hostile and friendly population groups", which served as an incentive "to drive civilian populations from one place to another." However, while many civilians were forced to flee, others, in contrast, were not allowed to do so. For instance, refugees from Gagra reported that they were not allowed to flee until they collected enough money. A Georgian man who lived in a village in the Abkhazian-controlled Gudauta region and was married to an Abkhaz woman tried to escape but was stopped by villagers. They told him that they had his name on a list and had been ordered not to let him leave to ensure that Abkhaz prisoners in Georgian hands were not being mistreated (1995, 28). There were also cases where whole families or villages were being held hostage. For example, an Abkhaz man from the village of Adziubzha in the Ochamchira district told HRW: "We were held hostage for six months [...]. Georgian troops would come in and check on us to see that we were all in the house; they would count heads. We eleven were the last to leave the village. Everyone else was dead" (1995, 39).

According to HRW, the war in Abkhazia stood out for the reckless and terrorising behaviour of fighters vis-à-vis the civilian population that aimed to create ethnically homogenous territories. As I showed, forcing out the civilian population was a strategy that was first used by Georgians but later – fortified through the spiralling process of collective categorisation – also increasingly by Abkhaz. However, it reached its apex in the second half of 1993 when the Abkhaz managed to take Sukhumi. The forces organised two major but unsuccessful attacks on Sukhumi – the first one in January and the second one in mid-March. A third attack took place on 1 July and was followed by a counter-offensive from the Georgians in an attempt to expand towards Gudauta.[67] At the end of July, the conflicting parties – under the pressure of Russia – agreed to a ceasefire, which obliged both sides to withdraw heavy weapons from Sukhumi. However, on 16 September, the Abkhaz forces broke the ceasefire. Benefitting from military successes in Ochamchira as well as disruptions by Zviadists that made it more difficult for the Georgian forces to

---

[67] Shevardnadze, who was at the front line at this time, almost got killed during the battle (HRW 1995, 37).

supply Sukhumi, the Abkhaz forces managed to surround the city from all sides by 20-21 September. On 27 September, the city eventually came under Abkhaz control (1995, 40–43).

The victory of the Abkhazian troops caused an immediate mass flight of the Georgian population, who feared falling victim to brutalised, vengeful fighters.[68] The UN Security Council (1993, para. 35) reported that "[a]fter the Abkhazian forces had taken Sukhumi, most Georgians living in the region between the Gumista and Inguri Rivers tried to flee before the arrival of the Abkhazian forces. Some others who stayed behind were reportedly killed when the Abkhazians took control of villages and cities in Ochamchira region." According to a report by the United States Department of State (1994, n.p.),

> [t]hose fleeing Abkhazia made highly credible claims of atrocities, including the killing of civilians without regard to age or sex. Corpses recovered from Abkhaz-held territory showed signs of extensive torture. The ethnic Georgian Prime Minister of Abkhazia, Dzhuli Shartava [...], was one such victim: his body was covered with severe bruising; his arms, legs, hands, and feet had been broken; his nose had been mutilated; his ears cut off; and his kneecaps shot before death reportedly for "refusing to kneel." An elderly Russian woman, resident in Abkhazia for 35 years before fleeing her village on September 16, reported that separatist forces seized nine villagers after they took control of the area and killed them all. She saw the body of her 30-year-old male neighbor, which showed evidence of massive beating; splinters had been inserted under his nails, and his skull had been crushed.

The take-over of Sukhumi thus "offered Abkhaz fighters an unprecedented chance at revenge for what Georgian fighters had done the year before" (HRW 1995, 42). Many have accused the Abkhaz forces of ethnic cleansing, pointing out that civilians were driven out of their homes by force; others, however, have stressed that the majority of Georgians, in fact, fled *in fear* of retaliation rather than under active force.[69] Hewitt (2013, 147), for instance, has argued that "Abkhazians abandoning areas under Georgian occupation probably did so in the main because they judged it to be a sensible precaution, just as those Kartvelians who fled in the wake of the fall

---

[68] Officials of the Georgian governments estimated that over 250,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia – a number that has been contested by Abkhazian authorities (Dale 1997, 83).

[69] The term "ethnic cleansing" first emerged in the context of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. A United Nations Commission mandated to look into human rights violations defined the term as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas" (United Nations 1994, para. 130).

of Sukhum on 27 September 1993 equally did so in the main through fear of what might happen, not because they were actually forced out under pain of execution, which is how the term 'ethnic cleansing' is surely to be understood in plain English."

There was, in fact, a very real fear that revenge might not only be sought against those who had been implicated in fighting against ethnic Abkhazians, but that others would be "swept up in the process of collective categorization" (Bergholz 2016, 142). An eyewitness from Ochamchira remembers how the Georgian population was indeed encouraged to leave as soon as possible: "From 8pm onwards the train was buzzing all night. The government knew that Sukhumi would be taken. The Kodori gorge was closed, people left through Merkheuli [...]. Throughout the night the siren was ringing and we were told: 'Do not stay in the houses, save yourselves!' In the morning we got onto a train" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 106).

An interview with one of my close Abkhaz informants, who fought for the Abkhaz National Guard provides an important glimpse into the vicious cycle of violence. When asked about the atrocities committed against Georgians after the Abkhaz victory, he explained:

> Those who committed atrocities were people who had been brutalised (*zverevshie*). For example, I knew a man, whose daughter, son-in-law and grandchild were killed by Georgians coming into their house. One child survived because it got scared and hid under the table. It saw how his mother, father and sister were killed. [...] Now imagine what the brother would do if he had an opportunity.... I remember how we went to Ochamchira to tell him that his sister and her family had been killed, killed for *nothing*... his heart turned into a stone. [....] In our village, there was an incident where the daughter was raped in front of her father, then they killed him and later her, I don't remember exactly... Their behaviour was so brutal [...]. You know there are cases when someone does something to you and that gives you a reason (*povod*) to get back at him. They did, in fact, give us a reason ...

By describing them as "brutalised", my informant points to the role that prior experiences of extreme violence and terror – especially of close ones, such as family members – can play in triggering and exacerbating a rush to commit revenge. According to Bergholz (2016, 148), who uncovered "a powerful desire to 'get even'" (2016, 161) among insurgents who had just suffered losses at the hands of the Ustašas, vengeance is "a concrete way to alleviate a profound sense of helplessness brought about by the previous wave of [...] killings." But in the case of Abkhazia, the

desire for revenge was possibly also strengthened, or somewhat normalised, through the custom of blood revenge, which has existed for centuries.[70] According to Abkhaz custom, a man is required to avenge injustices committed against his family and the failure to do so is traditionally regarded as dishonourable (see Inal-Ipa 1960). As anthropologist Sula Benet (1974, 65) has noted, "[n]ot to take vengeance is the greatest disgrace conceivable."

Traditionally, blood revenge is conceived as "an intra-group phenomenon occurring within one (sub)ethnic group or among a group of locally based families, clans, or tribes" (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015, 163). However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the custom of blood revenge played a significant role in the way in which the Georgian refugees were treated or were expected to be treated.[71] After her first trip to Abkhazia after the war, anthropologist Paula Garb (1995, 43) noted that "[i]n line with the logic that a whole family is responsible for the actions of one member, I heard stories of Abkhazian soldiers who, immediately after liberating occupied territory, committed crimes against Georgian families that resembled the crimes that were committed by Georgian troops against their own families."

Unlike in traditional cases of blood revenge, where those who committed the initial transgression and this person's male members of the lineage (all those connected through blood kinship) are held responsible and are therefore potential victims, in ethnic conflict, blood revenge can thus be modified in that it is the whole nation or ethnic group that becomes a potential target. This is possibly linked to the nature of the offense itself: While the offenses were committed against specific people, they were usually targeted in the name of the larger ethnic group they were categorised as belonging to. As an Abkhaz civil society activist put it when talking about the role of blood revenge, in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz war the perpetrator "is more than a personal enemy; it is the enemy of *my people*".[72]

Understanding how blood revenge and ethnic cleansing become intertwined is important for several reasons. First, it can help us to better understand the

---

[70] According to Garb (1995, 42), the tradition of blood revenge was modified but not eradicated in Soviet times.

[71] During my fieldwork, this was one of the most sensitive topics to raise and hence difficult to get access to.

[72] This resonates with research conducted on other violent conflicts in the Caucasus. In their study of how blood revenge drove violent mobilisation of Chechens against Russians, Souleimanov and Aliyev (2015, 159) discovered that "when would-be avengers are unable to identify or locate a group associated with the offender through blood kinship, they may seek blood revenge against the narrowest group that they are able to associate with the offender."

apolitical reasons for violent mobilisation (see also Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015, 168, 173). Second, it can explain the vicious cycle of violence and hatred that often persists over generations. But most importantly, it allows for a deeper understanding of the local conceptions of justice that have been at play. Despite the international condemnation of the displacement of the Georgian population from Abkhazia, from the viewpoint of many Abkhaz, the displacement was an act of *retributive justice*. When I asked my interlocutors during my fieldwork if the Abkhaz could have reacted differently to the Georgian troops, my contacts typically responded: "Who attacked whom? Did *we* attack them, or what? They did not give us a choice other than to defend ourselves." Many seemed to think that the Georgian side lost in a battle that it had itself provoked and that made separation in the form of the expulsion of the "hostile" Georgian population a legitimate response, as it was the only way to prevent more violence.

But the issue of security was deeply related to the principal issue of betrayal. There was a strong sense that Georgians had forfeited their right to live in Abkhazia. To some extent, this was because they were regarded as having their "roots" outside of Abkhazia (mostly Western Georgia). As one of my contacts who fought in the war put it: "We did not kick anyone out. Everyone went where they belonged." But more often I was told that it was because they – by supporting the Georgian troops – had turned their back on the *local* community of which they had been a part. Even those who did not actively participate in the fighting were assigned blame: My contacts often conceded that there were many innocent people who got caught up in a war they did not want and I was also told of cases where Georgians helped their Abkhaz neighbours. However, having failed to mobilise against the Georgian troops, *all* Georgians seemed complicit. My interlocutors would frequently say: "Why didn't they defend us? Why didn't they stand up against the troops and say: 'Let us and our neighbours live in peace, we don't want you here!'" In their understanding, it was the Georgians who brought about their own suffering, either through action (fighting) or inaction (failing to protest).

4.5. Conclusion

The previous chapter demonstrated that although there were tensions on the political – and to some extent on the inter-personal – level, a cross-ethnic,

"international" community nevertheless existed in Abkhazia throughout the Soviet period. As I showed in the first section of this chapter, this, to some extent, changed in July 1989, when the first significant instance of intra-communal violence occurred. Although inter-ethnic relations had already been strained before, my material suggests that it was only after the July clashes that Abkhazian society became truly polarised along ethnic lines. Even though the clashes were initiated by specific activists, they triggered large-scale mobilisation across Abkhazia and therefore had far-reaching consequences beyond the immediate circles in which they occurred, causing a rapid spike in levels of "groupness" on the Georgian and the Abkhaz side.

And yet, while both political and personal boundaries became more rigid in the perestroika period, and especially after the clashes in July 1989, the situation remained tense but calm – with no further clashes – until August 1992. In fact, when the (para-)military groups entered Abkhazia on 14 August, this still came as a shock to many, who did not expect a full-scale war to erupt. Despite the increasing polarisation, large-scale intercommunal violence was not widely, if at all, anticipated. This demonstrates that the course of events was anything but set at this point and that some sense of inter-ethnic solidarity grounded in local networks was still in place. Particularly striking in this context is the statement that "*Georgians and Abkhaz all ran in the same direction, no one knew what had happened*" (Rima, quoted in Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 92), which demonstrates that constructions of "us" and "them" were not yet neatly structured along ethnic lines.

The material thus suggests that although scholars and other observers often like to speak of how tension, or violence, "escalates" into war, in the case of Abkhazia, large-scale violence was ultimately provoked by the elite-level decision to send military troops into Abkhazia. Hence, it was not an "escalation" of low-level violence – for, as I mentioned earlier, the clashes in July 1989 remained a rather isolated incident.[73] Despite the tensions on the political level surrounding the question of Abkhazia's political status, sending military troops into Abkhazia was not inevitable at that point; instead, it was a conscious decision made by specific political actors in Tbilisi who most likely thought that this would quickly "solve" the issue.

In reality, the violence that unfolded "created" hatred, fear and anger where it had not previously existed, or at least not at such an intensity. When the (para)military groups entered Abkhazia, they began to terrorise the local population.

---

[73] See also Shesterinina (2014, 152–55).

Their priority was looting and even though their primary target was often ethnic Abkhazians, they did not necessarily discriminate in terms of ethnicity. Rather, it seems that ethnicity provided them with a script they followed loosely and thus, in many cases, served as a pretext. While some were certainly motivated by nationalist hatred, their mission, it appears, was to "get the job done".

However, once the violence was unleashed, it instilled great fear among the Abkhaz. Suddenly, ethnicity was not only a matter of politics, but life and death. This was to some extent also true for Georgians with ties to Abkhaz, such as those from mixed families. Although there were people who showed solidarity with Abkhaz, doing so put them in great danger. In this sense, the war forced people to take sides for reasons of security and not necessarily hostility. Here, the idea of the "script" as outlined by Lee Ann Fujii (2009, 12–13; see also chapter 1) in the context of the Rwandan genocide is once again useful. Fujii uses the term "script" to describe how ethnic conflict is to some extent "imposed" on local people who feel under pressure to follow it but do not necessarily do so – or at least not in the way or for the reasons they are expected to. Many Georgians did, in fact, refuse to follow the script and left Abkhazia as soon as the war started. While this was not the kind of active resistance that many Abkhaz seem to have hoped for, their departure was often nevertheless a decision to stay out of it.

But ethnic antagonism was also forced upon people in another sense. Having lost their close ones, for many the experience of extreme violence instilled a trauma that went so deep that it seemed impossible to undo. In this sense, antagonism became imprinted into the psyche and thus very "real". As Kate Brown (2003, 210) has noted, although in a different context, during war identities are "not simply 'imagined,' but [...] bestowed, dispensed, and forged through violence". Most importantly, the experience of extreme violence and terror triggered a process of antagonistic collective categorisation that, together with a desire for revenge, paved the way for the eventual ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population.

The chapter therefore attests to the power of violence to produce rigid antagonistic identities, as scholars have observed in many other regions of the world. It not only shows what people do with violence but what violence does to people. While a discourse of antagonism certainly existed before the war, it was ultimately the war itself that turned ethnicity into the most important source of identity. This shows that violence has an important life of its own. It is also only through attention

to the dynamics of violence that we can understand the conditions under which large-scale displacement became possible. While ideas of the exclusive ownership of the land were certainly at play, my material suggests that war-related trauma and hatred played an important role too. The chapter is therefore also a reminder that zero-sum categorisations of "victim" and "perpetrator" rarely reflect the complex realities of mass violence on the ground.

At the same time, violence did not only generate antagonistic relations. In fact, there were many cases of inter-ethnic rescue. Consequently, even though the war brought an end to the multinational community in Abkhazia, some ties continued to exist and were even strengthened after the war, often across the conflict divide. As Torsten Kolind (2008, 40) has noted in the context of Bosnia, "[v]iolence plays a part in constructing a general polarised atmosphere of 'us and them', but this does not say anything about how people react or relate to such a dichotomised space of identity."

PART II.
AFTER VIOLENCE

Chapter 5.   Scales of Loyalty: Post-war Internationalism

Towards the end of 1993, the Abkhaz forces had not only secured a military victory over Georgia but also achieved the removal of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia. But the forced expulsion of the local Georgian population was more than the removal of an immediate security threat – it was also an attempt to "purify" a politically and ethnically heterogeneous space. Inspired by anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1967), Robert Hayden (1996, 784) has defined ethnic cleansing as "the removal of specific kinds of human matter from particular places". Drawing on his experience in the former Yugoslavia, he argues that ethnic cleansing is the violent attempt to create a reality that has not existed before, i.e. "to implement an essentialist definition of the nation and its state in regions where the intermingled population formed living disproof of its validity: the brutal negation of social reality in order to reconstruct it."

However, while ethnic cleansing can be read as an attempt to disentangle and create *ethnic* purity, its implementation does not necessarily produce the "ideal" outcome imagined. In the case of Abkhazia, the situation on the ground remained inherently "messy", as the region continued to be deeply heterogenous even after the expulsion of the Georgians and the exodus of many others. Not only were there other non-Georgian nationalities that stayed in Abkhazia, such as Armenians and Russians, but there was also a substantial Georgian community that remained in – or returned to – the border region of Gali. Moreover, in addition to ethnic diversity, there was also the legacy of cultural "impurity" in the form of mixed Georgian-Abkhaz families particularly in Abkhazia's eastern regions. Consequently, the removal of the Georgian population did not put an end to the fear of being a minority in what they regarded as their exclusive homeland. Given these circumstances, how did people of various backgrounds manage to co-exist? What were the different strategies employed by both Abkhaz and non-Abkhaz residents?

The aim of the chapter is therefore to explore how ethnic diversity was managed in the aftermath of war and the context of unresolved conflict. I argue that while ethnic identity became highly salient, belonging was not solely defined by having the right (Abkhaz) ethnicity, but also by one's loyalty to the Abkhaz cause of separating from Georgia. This, I suggest, allowed non-Abkhaz communities and residents to be included in a cross-ethnic "self" that defined itself in opposition to

"Georgian imperialism". However, inter-ethnic relations remained ambivalent, for even though the extended self was built on the idea that Abkhaz were not the only victims of Georgian imperialism, they nevertheless saw themselves as the main victims, and, hence, the main defenders of Abkhazian sovereignty. Hence, while post-war Abkhazia did not become ethnically homogeneous, it did largely become politically homogeneous. And yet, although the politicisation of ethnicity formed the basis for renewed inter-ethnic solidarity, it also (re)produced an ethnic hierarchy, with the ethnic Abkhazians on top.

5.1. Reconceptualising belonging: ethnicity, security and loyalty

As Ivana Macek (2009, 32–33) aptly observed in her ethnography of Sarajevo under siege, when people met during the war,

> they almost invariably began by identifying one another's national identities. Even if they had known one another before, each assessed whether the other had changed as ethnoreligious identity became more salient. Behind the issue of national identity, though, lay more important questions: Was this person still worthy of trust? Could he or she be considered morally decent? Or had he or she crossed an ethical line beyond which further relation was morally impossible?

Similarly, identifying a person's ethnicity was of utmost importance in post-war Abkhazia. As Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia (1997, 5; emphasis added) pointed out, in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, inter-ethnic hostility was not about ethnicity per se, but the political position and interests that it has come to signify:

> Georgians dislike Abkhaz not because they have some particular misgiving about the Abkhaz in particular or about minorities in Georgia in general, but because the Abkhaz are "separatists" who want to take what Georgians believe is a legitimate part of Georgian territory. The Abkhaz in their turn dislike Georgians as imperialists and aggressors who want to deprive them of their land. But Georgians would proudly support a 'good' Abkhaz who denounced the Abkhaz separatism, while the Abkhaz would do the same for a non-imperialist Georgian who supports the Abkhaz cause (*although there are, unfortunately, not many examples of either pro-Georgian Abkhaz or pro-Abkhaz Georgians to be found*).

This reveals the extent to which ethnicity itself became redefined during and after the war. As Nodia acknowledges in parentheses, it did, in fact, become nearly

inconceivable to be both Abkhaz *and* support Abkhazia's integration into Georgia, or, conversely, to be Georgian and support Abkhazian separatism. Moreover, after the war, political and security concerns had become deeply intertwined: somebody's ethnicity was not only seen as the most reliable predictor as to whether another person shared one's most fundamental interests in relation to the conflict, but when meeting an Abkhaz person, one was also safe to assume that he or she had not supported the Georgian troops and killed another Abkhaz (and, as a consequence, was not a threat to one's own life).

The highly politicised and securitised nature of ethnic identity had profound consequences for those who chose or were associated with "the other side". Those who were ethnically Abkhaz and pro-Georgian were no longer recognised as "real" Abkhaz by the majority of their ethnic kin. As mentioned in chapter 3, there was indeed a circle of Abkhaz of "Georgian orientation" whose members found themselves on the other side of the conflict divide after the war. A prominent example was Lorik Marshania, who was born in Sukhumi in 1933 and, after completing his doctorate at the Moscow State Institute for Economics, held a number of important academic and political posts in Abkhazia (and later at the republican centre in Tbilisi). According to Wikipedia (2019), "Abkhaz by nationality, Lorik Marshania was one of the few Abkhaz state leaders who resisted the leader of the separatists, Vladislav Ardzinba. After losing control over Abkhazia in 1993, Lorik Marshania left Abkhazia with his family and worked for a long time as Deputy Chairman of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia [government-in-exile]."

At the time of my fieldwork in Georgia proper, Lorik Marshania was no longer alive, so I decided to reach out to his daughter, Ada Marshania, instead. When I mentioned Ada to one of my Abkhaz contacts and explained that I had asked her for an interview, he instantly repudiated my categorisation of her as Abkhaz: "These people are only Abkhaz in name.... there is nothing Abkhaz about them!". Thus, although someone like Lorik or Ada Marshania might be regarded as having Abkhaz *blood*, that did not automatically make them "truly Abkhaz" or Abkhaz at all in the eyes of my Abkhaz interlocutors. This demonstrates that even though blood relations continued to be important, they were not in itself sufficient to construct Abkhaz belonging; equally important was one's support of the cause of the Abkhaz people.

In the post-war period, belonging was determined by two factors: first, one's ethnicity and, second, one's loyalty to the Abkhaz cause. While for ethnic Abkhazians, the two had become inextricably linked – if you were Abkhaz, you were for Abkhazia's independence and vice versa – for members of other nationalities it was the second factor which opened up a space for cross-ethnic solidarity, allowing them to become integrated into an "extended self" encompassing not only ethnic Abkhazians (the "core" self), but all those reunited against Georgian "imperialism". This was important given the degree of ethnic heterogeneity that continued to characterise post-war Abkhazia. According to the last Soviet census, the main nationalities living in Abkhazia (in addition to the Abkhaz and the Georgians) before the war were Armenians (76,541), Russians (74,914), Greeks (14,664), Ukrainians (11,673), Jews (1,673), Estonians (1,466) and Ossetians (1,165). Fourteen years later, in 2003, the *de facto* authorities registered 44,869 Armenians, 44,041 Georgians, 23,420 Russians, 1,486 Greeks, 1,797 Ukrainians, 446 Estonians, 457 Ossetians and 665 Turks, suggesting that at least 55.8% of Abkhazia's post-war population was non-Abkhaz (Ethno-Kavkaz, n.d.). But even these figures were suspected to be too generous towards the Abkhaz population; as Trier et al. (2010, 30; see also Clogg 2008) noted, "[m]ost questionable are the statistics on the Abkhazians and Armenians, where the number of ethnic Abkhazians seems to be inflated and the figures for Armenians significantly underestimated." The results of the 2011 census, which indicated an increase in the Abkhaz population to 122,175 (50.8 % of the total population) (Ethno-Kavkaz, n.d.), were regarded with even more suspicion by international observers and locals and were never officially published.[74] Even many of my contacts believed that there were, in fact, more Armenians living in Abkhazia than Abkhaz, or at least *as many*.

The continued existence of non-Abkhaz communities nourished a demographic anxiety that deeply affected inter-ethnic relations even after the expulsion of the Georgian "enemy" and it was in particular the Armenian community that became increasingly cast as a new "internal other" not only because of their numerical but also their economic strength.[75] Once, when I was having coffee with my Armenian neighbour, a well-educated woman in her late 30s, I asked her why she thought there was so little development in Abkhazia. She replied: "You don't

---

[74] For a detailed discussion of the results of the 2011 census, see Taklama (2011).
[75] See Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2013, 2088-2089) for a discussion of the economic situation of the Armenians in Abkhazia.

understand that? I will explain it to you." According to Nare, there was little motivation to develop: "Abkhaz don't like to work. That's why they need us Armenians, because we work for them. In my family, for example, there are doctors, school directors, etc... When there are no vegetables at the market, people like to joke, 'Where are the Armenians today?' In terms of numbers, we are probably more than the Abkhaz, but they don't want to admit this."

Whereas the Armenians shared the common stereotype of the Abkhaz as "lazy", my Abkhaz contacts often expressed their own stereotypes vis-à-vis the Armenians as being primarily concerned with their own economic benefit. Although some had Armenian neighbours they socialised with, there was a more general sense of unease about the Armenian presence that was reminiscent of Iskander's depiction of the attitudes of the Chegemians vis-à-vis the so-called "Endurskies" discussed in chapter 3 (with the only difference that there was traditionally less intermingling between Abkhaz and Armenians than Abkhaz and Georgians). It seemed as if they were constantly guarding their movements and actions to make sure that they respected whose land it was. And they had no doubt that it was theirs: having been willing to sacrifice their lives for the "liberation" of their "land", they had proved that their entitlement was not just based on their status as the titular nation and therefore conceptual, but also something that they had actively earned.

As Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi (2010, 94–95), among others, have noted in their work on inter-ethnic relations in Abkhazia, "[i]t is a more or less accepted collective perception (except in the Gal/i district) that since the Abkhazians played a key role in the war, they deserve special treatment in running the de facto republic's political and economic affairs." The involvement in the war of people and communities thus came to constitute the foundation for loyalty in the post-war period and as such became a key principle in the organisation of both social and political relations. While the minimum criterion for proving loyalty was having stayed in Abkhazia and not supported the Georgian side – whether as an active fighter or a tacit supporter – the maximum criterion was active involvement in the fighting alongside the Abkhaz.

5.2. Proving loyalty through involvement in the war: Armenians in Abkhazia

The Armenians were among those who fell onto the latter side of the spectrum. When the war began, local Armenians did not immediately take a clear side. Two Armenian organisations existed in Soviet Abkhazia – "krunk" and "mashtot" – and whereas *krunk* was more actively pro-Abkhaz, *mashtot* remained neutral. According to Mikhail Kuzub (2015), their more or less neutral stance had two main reasons: First, the Armenians in Abkhazia had been traditionally oriented towards their co-ethnics living in the nearby Russian Kuban region and were not strongly integrated into the official structures in either the Abkhazian ASSR or on the level of the Georgian union republic. Second, there was also a big historical community of Armenians in Georgia, many of which had links to Abkhazia. But the situation changed in late February 1993, when assaults were carried out on Armenian villages in the Sukhumi, Gulripsh and Ochamchira districts by Georgian fighters.[76] In the course of these attacks, Armenians began to organise themselves in defence, establishing an Armenian battalion named after Ivan Bagramian, a famous military commander in the Second World War. Although small in numbers, with only between 500 and 1500 members, the battalion nevertheless gained notoriety in particular for its role towards the end of the war, as its members were the first ones to storm the symbolically important building of the Council of Ministers in the centre of Sukhumi.[77] According to Kuzub (2015), there were also some 500 local Armenians who fought alongside the Georgian troops. These were Armenians with close ties to Georgians who were mostly from Sukhumi and Ochamchira and the surrounding areas.

Once the Abkhaz troops secured their victory, any link that had previously existed between the Abkhazian Armenian community and Georgia became suppressed.[78] Instead, the official public discourse in post-war Abkhazia began to stress the proximity between ethnic Abkhazians and Armenians, highlighting the

---

[76] For eye witness accounts of the assault, see Sharia (1993).

[77] According to eyewitnesses, among those defending it on the Georgian side were several Armenians from Georgia. Kuzub (2015) describes the scene as "tragic", with Armenians on both sides shouting and shooting at each other in "their native language".

[78] The pro-Georgian "cultural leader" of the Abkhazian Armenians, Arshavir Dzhidarian died in 1989 – three years before the war – and it is not common to commemorate his work in contemporary Abkhazia. Another prominent Armenian figure with a "pro-Georgian orientation", the deputy head of the council of ministers of Abkhazia Smbat Saakian, was shot (Kuzub 2015).

sacrifices made by the Armenian fighters "for the sake of Abkhazia". For example, Marieta Topch'ian (2015, n.p.), a teacher and civil society activist from Abkhazia, wrote:

> For the courage and heroism shown in battles, Armenian soldiers received various decorations. Twenty people were awarded the title of Hero of Abkhazia, including Ashot Kosian, Vagan Raganian, Galust Trapizonian, all members of the legendary "Tiger" tank – the Labra residents Gabriel and Aik Kesian and Smbat Kerselian, the commander of the Sukhum battalion, and [...] the Armenian battalion commander Sergei Matosian as well as posthumously Misak Eremian, Artur Isakhanian, Ovanes Bartsikian; many were awarded the Order of Leon, including Vagarshak Kosian, and medals. More than 200 people gave their lives for the freedom of Abkhazia. There were also many civilians living in the occupied territory who died, having experienced the full horror of Georgian chauvinism.

The involvement of the Armenian battalion and how it was framed in the post-war period highlights the existence of another discourse in addition to that of Abkhazia as the homeland of the Abkhaz, namely the discourse of Abkhazia as a *multinational* place that had to be liberated from Georgian imperialists. This discourse, together with the narrative of Armenian military resistance thus conferred legitimacy on the large Armenian community living in post-war Abkhazia and helped to ease the suspicion and demographic anxiety evoked by their presence. But highlighting that the Abkhaz were not the only victims and not the only ones who stood up to the "aggressors" was an important discursive tool for the Abkhaz too. In contrast to the emphasis on ethnic survival, it painted Abkhazia as fundamentally multinational and thus an internationalist stronghold that continued to persist even after the war and unilateral secession from Georgia. Foregrounding a cross-ethnic, anti-Georgian alliance shifted the attention from Abkhaz separatism to the oppression of minorities and human rights violations more generally.[79] As such, it reflected positively on the Abkhaz community, making it appear as the party to the conflict which was "truly" tolerant towards ethnic diversity. Ethnic Abkhazians have long prided themselves in their openness to diversity. Not only have they been under the influence of a variety of religions (see also Clogg 2008, 319), but it is also common for Abkhaz people to command several languages. As one of my contacts liked to

---

[79] As Caspersen (2012, 37) has noted, it is a common strategy among unrecognised states to "combine self-determination arguments with a claim to a 'remedial' right to secession, arguing that the parent states denied them civil and political rights and that they were subjected to egregious abuses."

joke, the Abkhaz people have the unique talent of picking up the languages spoken by the diverse people around them and "would even learn Italian if Italians would show up in Abkhazia, forgetting their own language on the way."

But this comment also encapsulates the fundamentally ambivalent relationship that many Abkhaz people I talked to exhibited towards the past and present of ethnic diversity in Abkhazia, where tolerance is simultaneously seen as a source of pride and – given that diversity was often the result of violent resettlement policies at the cost of the ethnic Abkhazian population – a threat. A strategy to resolve this tension was through a conception of multinationalism that rested on an ideal of equality that implied equal rights for all nationalities in principle but not necessarily within the same territory. The principle of equality of nations was understood to mean that *every nation should have a homeland*, and, unlike the Abkhaz, the Armenians already had one somewhere else. This became particularly clear during a visit to a charity organisation in Sukhumi, which offers support to ethnic Abkhazians struggling with poverty. When they presented their programmes and I asked whether they also considered providing aid to members of other nationalities, an employee of the charity explained: "We do not want to separate the population according to ethnicity, but Armenians and Russians get support from diaspora organisations and their kin-states, that's why they don't need additional support. Abkhazia is the only state we have."

As in Soviet times, the "extended self" was conceived of as hierarchical, with the titular nation of the Abkhaz on top. Consequently, a "loyal" Armenian was one who supported the Abkhaz cause for self-determination – someone like Sergei Matosian, a so-called "hero of Abkhazia" from Gagra and leader of the Sukhum battalion, who, when asked in a TV interview what motivated him to join the Abkhaz forces, explained that it was the only right thing to do and proudly called himself an "Abkhaz of Armenian origin" (*abkhaz armianskogo proiskhozhdeniia*), thereby underlining that for him, being Abkhazian comes first, and Armenian second (Telekompaniia Abaza TV 2016). However, "patriots" like Matosian were the exception rather than the rule and this was well understood among my Abkhaz interlocutors. When talking about the Armenian role in the war, my Abkhaz host once bitterly remarked that "at the end of the day, we know quite well that in reality, they were not fighting for us, for Abkhazia, but only to save themselves!". Outside of the public discourse, ethnic Abkhazians were thus suspicious that Armenian

144

resistance was motivated by self-interest rather than "true" solidarity with the Abkhaz. In the post-war period, Armenian-Abkhaz relations were therefore caught in a vicious circle: because of their lesser involvement in the war, Armenians were expected to give priority to the Abkhaz, which in turn made it more difficult for Armenians to regard Abkhazia as more than their "home" and also reduced the probability that they would be willing to defend Abkhazia in the future.

5.3.   Proving loyalty through "non-involvement": Russians

But what about those who did not fight on either the Abkhaz or the Georgian side? How did they prove their loyalty? As in-depth conversations with a Russian family revealed, the minimum criterion for "loyalty" was *non-involvement* in the war in combination with the acceptance of Abkhazian statehood.

Aleksandr and Vera had met in Siberia in the 1980s and then moved to Abkhazia – where Aleksandr's parents lived – to start a family. When the fighting broke out, they were unsure what to do and eventually decided to stay and see how the situation developed. Their flat was an important factor influencing their decision, as Vera remembers: "When we moved here, flats like this did not exist anywhere else we had been – so spacious and with high ceilings! When the war started, my relatives didn't even believe we were struggling; we had been living so well." At the beginning of the war, both of them were certain that tensions would resolve quickly. However, when the situation became worse, Aleksandr – a father of two little girls at the time – went into hiding in order to avoid being conscripted into the army.

When I asked him whether this had any repercussions for him and his family after the war, he shook his head: "People understood that this was not our war. What was important was that I had not fought on the Georgian side and that we stayed here throughout the war until this day." In order to get Abkhazian citizenship, it sufficed to provide three letters of recommendation by neighbours. However, most of their neighbours changed after the war, which is also one of the reasons they never had a real chance to develop close relationships: "We had basically just moved into the flat when the war started and most of our neighbours changed; only four families stayed." During Soviet times, the town where they lived hosted a prestigious scientific institute and most inhabitants were Russians from other parts of the Soviet Union. Aleksandr, who grew up in Abkhazia, knew only a couple of Abkhaz people

back then – "two from school and perhaps a few more". Nina, who moved to Abkhazia in the late 1980s, remembered: "the Soviet Union was falling apart and there was all this talk of self-determination .... all of a sudden, we realised that we did not really know who these 'Abkhaz' were. There was, of course, an Abkhaz intelligentsia in the city, but they were a very small minority."

At the early stages of my research, Aleksandr in particular liked to stress the extent to which they felt like outsiders in a nationalising Abkhazian state. He told me with pride that he was born in Russia and that his parents moved to Abkhazia when he was a baby: "Now they [the Abkhaz] tell everyone that this is not their home, even if they were born here. I am just glad I wasn't born here; *I still have a home*." Vera and Aleksandr both agreed that ethnic Abkhazians care first and foremost about their own kin: "For Abkhaz people family comes first. First they look after their family and then maybe do some work." Vera in particular also warned me to be careful when conducting research: "Our people are very friendly and easy to talk to, but there are things they will never tell you; things they will never want you to know. You need to be careful." And Aleksandr added: "They love guests here, but they don't want you to stay." But by signalling distance, they also demonstrated a certain level of cultural intimacy with the people they casually referred to as "our people" (*nashi liudi*). During our conversations, they often stressed that after the Soviet collapse they were forced to "study" the Abkhaz and other local people, such as the Mingrelians. Aleksandr in particular prided himself in the fact that he "understands this place" and "knows the mentality". There was much that they had learned the hard way, by making mistakes such as trusting the wrong people or expressing their opinion too openly etc. These negative experiences left them with an intimate knowledge that became the basis for a sense of mistrust vis-à-vis the Abkhaz.

The shared experience of war and intractable conflict had thus created an ambivalent relationship, where mistrust was fraught with sympathy and vice versa. In some ways, it was easier for me to share my experience in Georgia proper with Aleksandr and Vera, who were not as directly involved as many of the Abkhaz people I was in contact with. For instance, when I once mentioned that I enjoyed the cultural life in Tbilisi, Vera, hesitating for a second, said: "Of course, Tbilisi has always been a cultural centre. Do you remember, Aleksandr, all the famous actors came from there, right?" Aleksandr replied: "Hmm... yes, of course. *We* don't have a problem with the Georgians." And yet, having experienced thirteen months of war with two small

children and little to eat, a shared fear of Georgians and a certain solidarity with the Abkhaz nevertheless developed. In fact, over the course of my visits, sympathy for the Abkhaz became more and more pronounced. For instance, while Vera was happy to share her memories with me, she asked me not to be too critical of the Abkhaz: "You have to understand, the Georgians did not behave well either. Many of them took up arms against the Abkhaz. For example, I remember this one young Georgian man who showed the soldiers where the Abkhaz live. Luckily, we didn't experience any violent behaviour, mostly because we lived in the apartment block near the technical institute, but we knew that people were executed on the side streets, where people lived in houses. But here, they behaved." She then continued: "Can you image, 100 years ago they didn't have anything and lived in really poor conditions. And then, everything was destroyed after the war and nothing worked. And now they are somehow holding their state together."

Over time, they also expressed more nuanced attitudes towards their Russian kin-state. Vera told me: "For a long time we were upset that Russia didn't send us any help at all. We didn't have anything during the war, except for water." Talking about passportisation, Aleksandr did not seem too enthusiastic about his Russian citizenship: "If it wasn't for the pension, I wouldn't really need Russian citizenship. After all I live in Abkhazia and have everything here that I need." Having lived through the war and the economic blockade, it seemed that their lives had nevertheless become irrevocably entangled with Abkhazia. In many ways, Aleksandr and Vera had become part of a so-called Russian-speaking diaspora (Laitin 1995) whose homeland – the Soviet Union – no longer existed and who felt estranged from both their "kin-state" and their country of residence.

However, unlike, for example, in the Baltic states, in Abkhazia, it was not the Russians but the Georgians who had traditionally been perceived as the "colonisers". In addition, their numbers were much smaller and in decline – according to the 2011 census, 9.2% of the population were Russians, compared with 19.3% Georgians and 17.4% Armenians (Ethno-Kavkaz, n.d.). Even though there was a sense that Russians in Abkhazia were merely tolerated, they were not perceived as a threat in a way the Mingrelians and Armenians were and, as a consequence, they did not meet the same degree of hostility or mistrust. For Aleksandr, it was the lack of respect that seemed to hurt him most, for even though Abkhazia depended on Russia economically and

militarily, there was, in his words, "neither gratitude towards Russia nor any respect towards Russian people".

5.4.   The enemy within? The informal return[80] of the Gali Mingrelians

Within the hierarchy, the Georgian (Mingrelian) minority in the Gali district occupied the lowest position: Although they categorically belonged to the "enemy", their return was somewhat tolerated in the post-war period. However, unlike the Armenians or Russians, the Gali Mingrelians were largely excluded from the "extended self" and instead constituted the ultimate internal "Other" or fifth column.

Just as it has for the rest of the Georgian population in Abkhazia, the Abkhaz victory triggered a mass flight among the residents of Gali. However, once the 1994 ceasefire agreement came into force, between 35,000 and 40,000 returned to Gali (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 35). In 1998, they once again fled when an operation by the Georgian partisans (mostly consisting of displaced Georgians) to capture Gali was warded off by the Abkhaz military, allowing it to establish full control of the border region (see Shesterinina 2014, chap. 7). Around 1,500 houses were destroyed in the course of the fighting. However, under the pressure of the international community, this so-called "six-day war" was followed by a second wave of return. In the mid-2000s, UNHCR estimated that 45,000-50,000 Georgians resettled in the Gali district (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 35).

Why were they, despite the widespread anti-Georgian hostility, allowed to return? The standard response to this question is that the majority of the Gali residents were not actively involved in the fighting (e.g. Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, chap. 36; Clogg 2008). According to Baev (2003, 138–39), the Gali region "did not produce many volunteers or paramilitaries, since the political sympathies there were mostly on Gamsakhurdia's side". Kuzub (2015, n.p.) makes a similar point, quoting Tamaz Nadareishvili, the head of the government-in-exile in the post-war period, as having said that "[t]he Georgians of the Gali district (in Abkhazia) and Zugdidi, all Zviadists, did not take part in the war, because they were against Shevardnadze's power". But while this narrative was sometimes iterated by my

---

[80] The return of the Mingrelians to Gali is considered informal as it has not been officially recognised by the Georgian government.

interlocutors, they also usually stressed that the war would not have been possible had the Gali population not "opened the corridor" for the Georgian troops.

This suggests that other factors were at play: Toal and Frichova Grono (2011, 657–58), for instance, have pointed to the economic and strategic dimension of their return, arguing that "they [the Gali Mingrelians] are also an important work force in one of the agriculturally richest areas of Abkhazia; and their return has had a security dimension as well—the compactly settled and almost exclusively ethnic Georgian population of Gali might have served as a 'strategic buffer' in the event of a resumption of hostilities." Similarly, Clogg (2008, 308) has argued that "there is an economic imperative for this once highly productive, fertile region to be populated by people who will cultivate it" in addition to the fact that "repossession of land and property is less problematic here than in other parts of Abkhazia".[81]

Before the war, Gali was indeed a flourishing town. While tourism was concentrated in the west of Abkhazia (mostly in Gagra and Pitsunda), eastern Abkhazia was rich in agricultural production (e.g. wine, tea and citrus fruits). As one of my Mingrelian contacts who was born in the nearby village of Rukhi – which was once host to the annual Soviet "Abkhazian-Georgian friendship celebration" and is now on the other side of the conflict divide – told me, Gali was a popular shopping destination, especially for people from nearby Zugdidi in Georgia's Samegrelo region. There was a strong link between Gali and Zugdidi; according to my contact, men from Zugdidi liked to get married to women from Gali – "maybe because they were rich", as he joked. In his words, Gali and Zugdidi were like rivals: people in Zugdidi saw themselves as the "cultured" Mingrelians, mocking the "funny" Mingrelian dialect of the "backwards" Gali residents.

Gali and Zugdidi were connected through the 870m long Inguri bridge built between 1944 and 1948 by German prisoners (Jeska 2004). According to my contacts, there were no formal checkpoints during Soviet times with the exception of a highway police post. After the war, Gali became increasingly cut off from Zugdidi physically. Constituting the new border between Abkhazia and Georgia proper, the bridge was closed for traffic (with some exceptions). At the time of my fieldwork, it was heavily guarded by a joint Russian-Abkhazian border protection force strictly controlling the movement of people (and goods) in order to prevent the infiltration

---

[81] Clogg does not go into detail about what exactly she means by that. I suspect that what she is referring to is that there was less resettlement by Abkhazians from other regions, which made it easier for people to return to their houses.

of refugees, many of whom had resettled in Zugdidi. Although Gali residents were the only locals who were allowed to cross the border regularly, many nevertheless lacked the necessary documents and were thus prevented from going. Moreover, after the Russian FSB started to patrol the border, it became more difficult to bribe officers as well as to cross the border illegally (e.g. Lundgren 2018).

But Gali was not only cut off from Zugdidi through a "state border", but also from the rest of Abkhazia. Whereas reconstruction slowly began in other parts of Abkhazia throughout the 1990s, Gali continued to go through waves of violence and destruction. Even when I conducted my main fieldwork in 2017 – a time when the security situation in Gali had long improved – many of my contacts in and around Sukhumi looked at me with bewilderment on hearing that I had been to Gali. Although territorial control over the Gali region was perceived as strategically crucial, it was not regarded as a place that anyone in Abkhazia would consider visiting – or wanted me to visit. In addition to concerns about personal security, there was a great sense of suspicion: Why would I go to Gali? Who would I talk to? For even though the Gali Mingrelians had managed to come to an arrangement with the Abkhaz authorities that allowed them to live and work there and also cross the border, their primary allegiance, it seemed, remained with the Georgian state.

In fact, until recently, it was quite common for returnees to hold both Abkhazian and Georgian citizenship (plus, in some cases, Russian), which enabled them to cross into Georgia – where many were registered as IDPs – for welfare, healthcare and education. After the war, the Gali Mingrelians who returned used either their Soviet passports or the Form n.9, a Soviet-era replacement for lost identity documents. Under the leadership of President Bagapsh (2005-2011), Abkhazian internal passports began to be issued to Gali residents in order to replace the expiring Soviet passports. His successor Aleksandr Ankvab continued this policy of integration until 2013, when it emerged that Abkhazian passports had been issued even though the majority of their recipients continued to hold Georgian citizenship – which is illegal according to the Abkhazian constitution. Although applicants had been required to write a statement that they were not citizens of Georgia, this statement was often treated like a mere formality and passports were handed out to applicants in exchange for a bribe even if there was reason to believe that they were, in fact, citizens of the "enemy state" (Hammarberg and Grono 2017; JAMnews 2016a).

As a consequence, around 27,000 illegally issued passports were annulled in the districts of Ochamchira, Tkvarcheli and Gali (JAMnews 2016a) and in December 2015, a "Law on the Status of Foreign Citizens" was passed under a new government led by president Raul Khadzhimba with the purpose of regulating the status of the "undocumented" population (Hammarberg and Grono 2017; JAMnews 2016a). Now treated as "foreign nationals", the Gali residents holding Georgian passports – over 96%, according to the head of the administration (Gogua 2017, n.p.) – were now urged to either give up their Georgian citizenship and become Abkhazian citizens or to apply for a residence permit for the duration of five years. This had major implications for the locals: even though the option of becoming permanent residents allowed them to legally reside on Abkhazian territory, it did not grant them any political rights, therefore preventing them from voting or running for office in local or national elections.[82] As one local resident put it, "[a]fter receiving this residence permit we will be guests in our country, without rights" (Gogua 2017, n.p.).

But at the same time as the border population was increasingly alienated, different attempts were made to integrate them into the "self" by dissuading them from their "Georgian orientation". The first strategy – sometimes referred to as "Mingrelianisation" – was a discourse that stressed that Mingrelians are, in fact, a separate nation that fell victim to Georgian assimilation. Here, the aim was to integrate the Mingrelians into the "extended self" by appealing to a common sense of victimhood that is not based on shared ethnicity, but a shared threat of "Georgification", thus tying in with the idea of Abkhazia as a multi-national stronghold fighting Georgian "imperialism".

In contemporary Georgian society, Mingrelians tend to be perceived as regionally distinct but nationally Georgian (a so-called "sub-group" or "sub-ethnos") and the Mingrelian language, although linguistically distinct from Georgian, is often treated as a regional dialect.[83] Abkhazians, in contrast, like to stress the difference between Georgians and Mingrelians. For instance, mentioning "Georgians in Abkhazia" in a conversation, one of my contacts once instantly corrected me that "there are no Georgians in Abkhazia; there are only Mingrelians". At a different occasion, when I was talking about ethnic minorities in Georgia, a middle-aged Abkhaz man wondered why Mingrelians did not count as an ethnic group distinct

---

[82] For a detailed discussions of the main issues involved in the handing out of residence permits, see Hammarberg and Grono (2017, 61–63).
[83] For a detailed discussion of Mingrelian identity, see Broers (2012).

from Georgians. When I suggested that this is because Mingrelians are regarded as Georgians, he became agitated: "Whether they are regarded as such or not, what does that change about the fact that they *are* a nation?" In his view, however, Mingrelians were a "weak" nation that is "forgetting itself".

When I talked about the situation of the local population to the head of the Gali administration, an Abkhaz war veteran from the village of Mokva, he was quick to explain that more was being done to preserve Mingrelian culture in Gali than in Georgia itself: "Georgia is systematically destroying Mingrelian culture. […] There is no other place like Gal where you can hear so many people speak Mingrelian on the streets. In the centre of Zugdidi, on the other hand, you will hear mostly Georgian and if you speak Mingrelian, they will say you are backward!"[84] Indeed, Gali was the only place that published a monthly newspaper ("Gal") featuring articles in three languages, including Abkhaz, Russian and Mingrelian. However, as Trier et al. (2010, 52) pointed out, the circulation among the public was very low, "one reason being that Megrelian is first of all a spoken language without a developed literary standard or a history of written texts, and largely a vernacular that is used within families and among neighbours, and not in official situations."

Although I did encounter people who expressed pride in their distinct Mingrelian identity, "Mingrelianisation" did not appear to have significant grassroot support. Instead, it was promoted by local activists who were not themselves Mingrelian. At the time of my research, it also seemed to lack substantial institutional support. Like in Soviet times, every Abkhazian citizen had his or her ethnicity written in their identity documents. However, despite the popular conceptions of Mingrelians as a separate ethnic group, "Mingrelian" did not exist as a separate passport category; instead, they continued to be classified as "Georgians" in their official identity documents. When I asked the head of the administration why this was the case, he referred to "technical" limitations: "Unfortunately, there is currently no option to choose 'Mingrelian' as one's passport nationality. But that might change in the future!" However, having long become used to being labelled Georgian, none of my Mingrelian contacts seemed to mind.

The second and more recent attempt to "integrate" the local Mingrelians has followed an ethnic rather than an "internationalist" logic. Instead of stressing that

---

[84] According to Trier et al. (2010, 54), one of the reasons why Mingrelian is more widely spoken in Gali is that people are afraid to use Georgian in public.

the Mingrelians were a distinct people, it focuses on the idea that many of the Mingrelians now living in the Gali region were, in fact, descendants of Abkhaz who were forcefully "Mingrelianised" under Stalin and Beria (see chapter 2). In 2017, the "Council of the Murzakan Abkhaz" (*Sovet murzakansikh abkhazov*) was founded in order to help those concerned to "restore" their Abkhaz ethnicity, thereby giving some of the Mingrelians in the Gali region the chance to become part of the Abkhaz "core self". In the view of the head of the Gali administration, which supports the organisation, the "Mingrelianisation" of the "Murzakan Abkhaz" was a historical injustice on the part of Georgia that needs to be pointed out and rectified:

> In Georgia they say that we are now forcefully assimilating the Georgian population; but what we are in fact showing are the injustices committed against the Abkhaz [...]. Of course, this is in the interest of the Abkhazian state and it is not a coincidence that this organisation [the Council of the Murzakan Abkhaz] has an office in the building of the administration. But out of about 5000 Murzakan Abkhaz, there were only a few hundred applications. This is a very small number and I think that shows that we are not forcing anyone; that there is no such a thing as "Abkhazianisation" or whatever they call it.

When I met one of the representatives of the Council of the Murzakan Abkhaz, he was keen to emphasise that their work is not about "changing" people's nationality but "restoring" it. He and his sister, who both live in a remote village over an hour away from the Gali town centre, have a small office at the city administration where interested people can drop in to receive information about whether they qualify to "restore" their nationality based on a list of surnames that have been proven to be of Murzakan Abkhaz origin and therefore qualify – such as Ketsbaia (Ketsba in Abkhazian), Butbaia (Butba) or Gitsbaia (Gitsba).

After an initial meeting, they invited me to spend the day at their office. While we were drinking coffee, an older man came in who explained that his wife was Abkhaz and that his children lived in Russia and that it was difficult for him to get a Russian passport; however, with an Abkhazian one he would be able to enter Russia and stay there for three months.[85] He was followed by a young woman who struggled to write down the most basic information on the application form. When I enquired whether the applicants needed to provide evidence that they declined their Georgian citizenship, I was told that it was only necessary to commit oneself to getting rid of

---

[85] Georgian citizens are currently required to apply for a visa to enter the Russian Federation.

it within the duration of two years. Finally, when their office hours were over, they took me along to Sukhumi, where they were going to hand in the applications they had received earlier. In the back of the car, the sister – a quiet and thoughtful woman who works as a teacher in a village school – explained to me that their mission is "to help people with passportisation".

Therefore, while both of them appeared to be well aware of their Abkhaz ancestry and used their restored Abkhaz surname with some pride, it seemed that their primary goal was not so much to resurrect Abkhaz culture among the local population than to help those in a legal limbo to receive Abkhazian documentation. In doing so, they were taking advantage of a hybrid borderland culture. As the brother told me at an informal dinner in the evening, the people in Gali did not fit into *any* clear-cut categories; instead, they were something like a "new race" (*novaia rassa*) – a mix of Abkhaz, Mingrelian and Georgian, he said with a whimsical smile, thereby challenging the very applicability of "pure" ethnic categories, be it Abkhaz or Georgian.

5.5.   The legacy of "mixed" families and the disambiguation of Abkhaz identity

The Mingrelians compactly living in Gali were not the only Georgians that continued to reside in Abkhazia after the war. There were also the so-called "Mingrelian wives" who had remained in (or returned to) Abkhazia with their Abkhaz husbands and children. Hence, in addition to the threat of ethnic diversity, there was also a legacy of cultural "contamination" and ambiguity stemming from a history of mixed Georgian-Abkhaz families – a phenomenon that has not received any attention in the literature.

As I showed in the preceding chapter, by the time the war ended, hostility against Georgia and Georgians had reached an unprecedented level. Ambiguity was no longer tolerated, and people were under strong pressure to choose sides. While Georgian families were packing their essentials to flee as quickly as possible in the fear of falling prey to vengeful pro-Abkhaz fighters, those living in mixed families faced a dilemma. Where should they go? Whose side are they on? As an Abkhaz woman married to a Georgian recalled: "There were moments in my life when I went onto the street with my children and simply did not know which way to go. I

understood very well that on one side of the Gumista (a river in Abkhazia) there were my brothers, people close to me, and at the same time I could not escape the fact that I had Georgian children" (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 127).

In Abkhazia, the "logic of contamination" (2009, 101) mentioned in the previous chapter, which put mixed Georgian-Abkhaz couples and families at great risk of becoming victims of harassment and physical violence, followed a gendered logic. As discussed in chapter 3, in Abkhazia (and in much of the Caucasus) it is traditionally the husband's ethnicity that is considered dominant within the family and is also the one that is passed on to the children. Women were therefore expected to subordinate their own ethnic culture to that of their partner and his family and, as a consequence, were perceived to be less "contagious" than their male counterparts but also as more susceptible to contamination. Hence, it was easier for Georgian women married to Abkhaz men to stay in Abkhazia than for an Abkhaz woman married to a Georgian man; for unlike their male counterparts, the "Georgian wives" were seen as having been under the influence of their Abkhaz husbands and therefore less threatening.[86]

Couples where the man was Georgian and the woman Abkhaz, on the other hand, often opted to flee. As Liuda, an Abkhaz woman married to a Georgian who now lives in Tbilisi, explained to me: "You know, in the Caucasus, it is the husband who is traditionally considered to be the head of the family. The woman is therefore expected to follow her husband." The gendered nature of warfare played a role too: Although Liuda was keen to stress that her husband merely held an administrative post and was therefore not directly involved in the battlefield, the fact that he served in the army nevertheless made it difficult to stay in Abkhazia. While it did make a difference whether a person killed someone or assisted in a non-violent capacity, once somebody had served, he was regarded as a traitor and so were his wife and their children. But for many women, it was ultimately their children who were the major factor influencing their decision whether to flee or not. For example, Maia, an Abkhaz woman married to a Georgian man remembered that after the victory of the pro-Abkhaz forces, she first thought: "Why leave? The government will run away, and we, the people will stay together" (2006, 62). But when everyone else was leaving and there were talks about Abkhaz fighters approaching Ochamchira, she

---

[86] However, as the material presented in the previous chapter suggests, while it was *easier* for Georgian women to stay in Abkhazia than for Georgian men, it was not necessarily *easy* (see examples of mixed couples in 4.3. and 4.4.).

experienced a profound sense of fear for the lives of her children: "I will never forget when the rumour was going around that armed Abkhazians were walking from Tkvarcheli to Ochamchira; I took off my sandals and ran barefoot over stones across the city like a madwoman to protect my children" (2006, 64). Being the mother to *Georgian* children, she realised that she might not be able to protect them.

As Fedja Buric (2012) has argued in the context of Yugoslavia, the mixed nature of marriages between members of different ethnic groups becomes socially and politically relevant only at moments of ethnic polarisation – therefore, rather than "being" mixed, they "become" mixed. This was also the case in Abkhazia, where pre-war social relations were marked by a relatively low salience of ethnicity (see chapter 3). As ethnic tensions and ultimately the war marked families as mixed in a way they had not been before, the pressure to choose sides and thus once again "unmix" was growing. But while women had always been expected to adapt themselves to their husbands to some degree, now the pressure was not only cultural but also political. Some women actively took on the political attitudes of their Abkhaz environment and expressed hostility vis-à-vis Georgia. An example is the wife of Abkhazia's second *de facto* president, Sergei Bagapsh. In an interview with a Russian newspaper, Bagapsh humorously described her – a Mingrelian from Gali – as a "bigger separatist than myself" (Novyi Region 2007, n.p.).

And yet, "anti-Georgian" rhetoric could be more than a strategic mechanism to compensate for having the "wrong" ethnicity. In certain ways, the "Georgian wives" were also genuinely affected by the traumatic experiences of the people around them, who, although not their co-ethnics, were nevertheless "their people" in a social sense. As the following excerpt by a Georgian woman (Manana) illustrates, many struggled with emotions of collective guilt:

> Grief came to the neighbouring houses, they buried young boys of the age of 17-18 years, if you had seen what boys were buried ... it was very hard for me. My heart was breaking with grief, I wanted to go and offer my condolences, because these boys grew up before my eyes, but how could I go? When I went, I tried to leave quickly, but the neighbours reassured me: 'You are not to blame for their deaths ...' (Marshania, Tarbaia, and Kalandiia 2006, 51)

Despite her neighbours' reassurances, Manana felt deeply guilty about her presence. For although the "Georgian wives" had subordinated their ethnic identity to that of the family they had married into, they remained ethnically "Georgian". As a

consequence, many felt torn between their (at least) categorical belonging to the Georgian nation and the loyalty to the Abkhaz community they lived in. As a woman called Liana explained, "[i]t is hard. When you see the successes of Georgian athletes or artists on TV (*in my heart I am still a Georgian*), you get excited. But then a second feeling kicks in and you think: 'God, why am I excited, they are our enemies after all?' It is very hard to live with that your whole life" (2006, 89; emphasis added).

The issue of collective blame also resurfaced within the family. Liana remembered a conversation she had with her son when he was little:

> when we came to Abkhazia after the war, my young boy came from the yard and asked with surprise: "Mum, you are Georgian? Georgians are our enemies, they were shooting at us, killed many Abkhaz"... Then I sat him down and tried to explain that after all not all people are bad, not all Georgians fought, there are bad ones, who fought, but many did not want this war, they just couldn't do anything so it wouldn't happen. Then he asked: "And you don't love us, mum, because we are Abkhaz?" That was terrifying. (2006, 98–99)

This excerpt touches upon an important topic: how did these women raise their children in the light of the extreme ethnic antagonism that pervaded Abkhaz society? How did they explain the conflict and what values did they draw on? In Liana's case we can see an attempt to instil basic respect for the official enemy, for even though she was part of an Abkhaz family and was raising an *Abkhaz* child, her role as a primary caretaker also enabled her – at least to some extent – to engage in a *re*-humanising discourse and transmit her own intimate and more nuanced knowledge of the war ("not all Georgians fought, there are bad ones, who fought, but many did not want this war"). To do so, she did not in principle challenge the position of the Abkhaz as the ultimate victim for the ultimate blame was still placed on the Georgian side; instead, she invoked the familiar frame of war-time involvement, distinguishing between Georgians who fought and those who did not (or did not want to but had no choice).

For the children themselves, the situation was easier than for their mothers. Although I became acquainted with several children of "mixed" parents, they were usually not easy to identify, for the tradition of patrilineal ethnicity allowed them to keep their "mixed" background private. For example, on my first trip to Abkhazia, I met Khibla, who was introduced to me as a "young, ambitious Abkhaz woman". It was, in fact, only due to my own (perhaps intentional) naivety that I found out about

157

her background. To fill a moment of awkward silence, I announced that I was really tired because I had travelled all the way from Tbilisi. Even though I did not think her reaction would be hostile, when she all of a sudden smiled and said "I love Tbilisi!", it nevertheless took me by surprise. As it turned out, she had visited Tbilisi several times to see her relatives on her mother's side. Having married an Abkhaz man in Soviet times, Khibla's mother ended up staying in Abkhazia after the war, whereas many of her Georgian (Mingrelian) relatives had to flee and now lived in different locations across Georgia proper.

In our private conversations, Khibla acknowledged that she had "Georgian blood"; pointing towards her body, she once shouted: "What can I do? One part of my body is Abkhaz and the other one is Georgian. I cannot cut myself into halves. I am not going to give up my relatives because of the conflict." And yet, her mother's ethnicity had no bearing on her own ethnic identity. Khibla unambiguously identified – and was identified by others – as Abkhaz. It was also written in her passport; in fact, the continued practice of passport ethnicity allowed the children of mixed Georgian-Abkhazian marriages, such as Khibla, to officially "fix" their ethnicity as Abkhaz. Moreover, although she used to babble in Mingrelian as a child, Khibla was a native Abkhaz-speaker, which was one of the most important markers of Abkhaz identity. And most importantly, she did think of herself as an Abkhazian *patriot* and many of her friends were either politically active or engaged in charity work for the Abkhaz cause.

In her view, visiting a relative did not make her any less patriotic but was a matter of being a decent person who values family above all. But it was nevertheless something that she had to be quiet about. Given the importance that is attributed to family in the Caucasus, it was accepted in human terms but politically unwelcome and could therefore be easily held against her by others. Moreover, arranging a visit was a difficult process that required permission from the State Security Services. During the months of my fieldwork, Khibla applied several times but was only allowed to leave once. As Jolle Demmers and Mikel Venhovens (2016, 169) pointed out in their study of the Georgian-Abkhaz border, "[t]he spatial discourse expressed by the Inguri border is [...] not immediately associated with, or purely about, physical security. For many Abkhaz it mainly responds to the safeguarding of their Abkhazian identity". However, as we can see in Khibla's case, the protection of collective identity meant not only *keeping the enemy out*, but also *locking people in*. Through lengthy

and daunting procedures, those with Georgian relatives were discouraged from maintaining their ties to the Georgian part of their family, thereby preventing further post-war "mixing". Consequently, disambiguation was not only facilitated through the custom of patrilineal ethnicity and the legal practice of passport ethnicity, but also through a strict border regime.

However, it was not only specific people who were associated with ambiguity, but also a whole region. My interlocutors often complained that people from other, mostly western parts of Abkhazia looked at those from eastern Abkhazia with suspicion. For many, the border between "us" and "them" was located not along the Inguri river and around the adjacent borderland but far closer. Depending on the person, it was perceived to be somewhere in the Gulripsh region east of Sukhumi bordering the Ochamchira district, where many of the mixed families were located.

Figure 5. Regional composition of Abkhazia. Based on UN map of Georgia, 2004.

Due to my fieldwork activities in the region, this was a familiar terrain to me, which I soon realised was rather exceptional both by international and local standards. To some extent, this had to do with security concerns. Ochamchira was one of the regions that suffered most at the hands of the Georgian troops, since it was the first area with a significant Abkhaz population after passing the Mingrelian-dominated Gali district. Many houses had been burnt down when the region was under Georgian control, and when the Abkhaz secured their victory, they, in turn, burnt many houses previously inhabited by Georgians in order to prevent them from

returning. After the war, violence continued as part of the fighting against the partisans. Although the situation has long since improved, still today many houses in the Ochamchira district are either abandoned or ruined. As one of my close contacts from a nearby village put it: "In western Abkhazia, there is at least tourism. Here, it is as if the war ended only yesterday."

According to another interlocutor from the same village, tourists were being discouraged from travelling to Ochamchira: "Already at the border [with Russia], they scare people away, telling them that it is dangerous to travel to the east, as if the war was still going on." But beneath safety concerns there seemed to be a more general lack of trust vis-à-vis Abkhazia's eastern regions. One of my Russian interlocutors from the Gulripsh region, for instance, proclaimed that Abkhazia only really begins in Sukhumi, whereas everything eastwards is "virtually under Georgian control". He also explained that there was no need for him to learn Abkhaz: "What would I need it for? Here, there are no Abkhaz. It's all mixed Mingrelian-Abkhaz families that started to call themselves Abkhaz." He was of course exaggerating, as most of his neighbours spoke Abkhaz. What he implied was that there were no Abkhaz who lived up to his standards of ethnic purity. Much of the suspicion vis-à-vis the east therefore appeared to be rooted in the perceived ethnic, cultural and political ambiguity of the place as "neither here nor there". As such, it seemed almost more threatening than Gali, the border district, which although predominantly inhabited by Mingrelians and therefore disloyal, at least fell into the relatively stable category of the (internal) enemy.

In the eyes of many Abkhazians, "true" Abkhaz culture was located in the west, especially in the district of Gudauta, which was also the centre of Abkhaz resistance during the war. This became particularly clear during a dinner I was invited to near the town of Novyi Afon west of Sukhumi. Initially, the host was excited about my interest in Abkhazia and complimented me on my local knowledge; however, when I told him that I had conducted much research in the Ochamchira district, he looked both puzzled and suspicious, suggesting that there was no "uncontaminated" culture to be found there: "Why did you decide to go to Ochamchira if you are interested in Abkhaz culture? I can put you in touch with people in Gudauta and you can learn something about true Abkhaz traditions." When I later mentioned this to one of my close contacts from Ochamchira, he was outraged: "The people from Gudauta (*Gudautsi*) are such nationalists (*natsionalisty*)! They see

themselves as the 'pure Abkhaz' and call us 'Mingrelians' (*mengrel'tsy*), because they believe that we've intermingled too much with the Mingrelians. As if they alone won the war! They have no idea how we suffered."

Most of my interlocutors from Ochamchira unequivocally rejected the idea that Gudauta was Abkhazia's "core" territory, pointing to the *Abzhua* region – roughly covering today's Ochamchira and Tkuarchal district – as one of Abkhazia's seven historical districts.[87] Consequently, there was also a counter-discourse that allowed people to reclaim their Abkhaz identity. Some even contested the purity of Abkhaz culture in Gudauta and instead stressed the "contaminating" legacy of Russian and even Ottoman colonisation. In fact, some of my interlocutors in Ochamchira had a sense that *they* were in fact the only ones who were under no influence. When I asked a young civil society activist how she assessed the Georgian influence in the region, she smiled: "The west is under Russian influence, Gal is under Georgian influence and Ochamchira and Tkuarchal are under no influence at all."[88]

One day, my host (Raul) and I went to Novyi Afon to visit one of his old friends (Nugzar). Raul warned me in advance that the trip will inevitably involve a lot of toasting, drinking and eating. When we arrived, the women of the house had already prepared a massive table. As we walked through the door, they barely looked at us and during the whole dinner, they remained in the kitchen. After a few glasses of *chacha*, the local brandy, my host started to mock his friend: "Why doesn't your wife join us at the table? Are you Muslims, or what?" Later, he told me that a lot of the customs in the Gudauta region seem backwards to the Abkhaz in Ochamchira: "Yes, men and women have a different place, but why shouldn't my wife come to the table and exchange a few words? Why should she only stand in the kitchen? They live like Muslims, although they wouldn't admit that."

Once at the table, Raul and Nugzar immediately began arguing over the correct order and wording of their toasts, each of them trying to demonstrate that only they know the "true" Abkhaz traditions. While Nugzar kept saying "don't listen to him, he is not an Abkhaz, he is a Mingrelian! Imposter (*aferist*)!", Raul was yelling: "What do you want, you *Russian*?" Amused by their performance, I pointed at the

---

[87] The other historical districts (from west to east) are Sazden, Pskhu-Aibga, Bzypyn, Guma, Dal-Tsabal and Samurzakan.
[88] Before the war, Tkvarcheli (Tkvarchal) had the status of a separate city located within the Ochamchire district (Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010, 35). After the war, Tkvarchal was transformed into a separate district.

bottle of wine standing on the table, which had a Georgian label. Raul breaks into laughter: "Look! You are not just Russian, you are *half Russian*, *half Georgian*!" Raul thus drew on a counter-discourse that stresses Russia's influence over western Abkhazia, thereby suggesting that western and eastern Abkhazia were equally "impure". In doing so, he also challenged the assumption that it was only Georgia's influence that was regarded as problematic, something that I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

5.6.   A post-Soviet strategic "friendship": Abkhaz-Russian relations

The rejection of everything Georgian not only affected inter-group relations within Abkhazia, but also its external relations. Whereas the link to Georgia was largely cut off and the border closed, the cultural and political links with Russia were increasingly strengthened, which is, not least, evidenced by the fact that Russia is currently the only country with which dual citizenship is legally allowed. Despite Abkhazia's complicated relationship with Russia – after all, it was under the Tsarist regime that thousands of its ethnic kin were forced to emigrate to the Ottoman empire, thereby turning the region into an "empty land" – Russia increasingly became Abkhazia's "external self" due to its renewed strategic "loyalty". But this did not happen immediately. During and after the war, Russia officially took Georgia's side and backed its territorial integrity. Most importantly, it supported the imposition of economic sanctions by the CIS states launched in 1996, closed the Russian-Abkhazian border for men, and cut off the electricity supply (e.g. Francis 2011, 124). In the first decade after the war, the Abkhazian *de facto* government applied twice to join the Russian Federation, first in 1995 and a second time in 2001 – this time as an independent associated state – but was rejected both times (Zhemukhov 2012). It was only after Putin came to power in 2000 that Russia began to actively engage with the *de facto* authorities.

The first important step was what has come to be known as "passportisation", i.e. the process of the large-scale distribution of Russian passports. In 2002, *The Economist* (2002, 41) reported that Russia had offered passports to the 220,000 people in Abkhazia and that "two-thirds of the Abkhazians seemed happy to take them". The demand was indeed overwhelming: According to Abkhaz journalist Inal Khashig (2002, n.p.), "government offices have spent the entire month

working to a special regime from early morning to midnight without a break. Huge queues have formed. Villagers have abandoned work in the fields to go to the towns and have their documents processed." The rush was linked to an upcoming change in Russian citizenship law, which would have made the acquisition of passports significantly more difficult. By the end of June 2002, around 150,000 Abkhazians had obtained Russian passports, in addition to the 50,000 existing Russian passport holders (Khashig 2002).

The Georgian government and Western observers perceived the distribution of Russian passports as an act of "creeping annexation". As Vincent Artman (2013, 683–84, 685) noted, "[b]y naturalising 90 percent of the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia captured a sizeable portion of the population – and, discursively, the territory – of the Republic of Georgia" and, as a consequence, developed "a discursive claim to the populations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by constructing them as part of the Russian political community". However, most of my interlocutors who held a Russian passport did not see themselves as proper Russian "citizens"; getting a Russian passport was simply a necessity to be able to cross the border more easily. According to my contact Daur, "thanks to the Georgian policy towards Abkhazia, the mobility of Abkhazians is very limited. Practically, if the Russians would not have given Abkhazians Russian passports – and 70-80% of Abkhazians own a Russian passport – they could not go *anywhere*." Since Abkhazian documents are not recognised by most countries, a Russian passport was indeed the only document that allowed residents of Abkhazia to travel – at least within the post-Soviet space – unless they accepted Georgian citizenship.

Moreover, unlike Georgia, Russia was not perceived as a nationalising state. Daur, for instance, made it clear that for him, contemporary Russia was not a nation-state in a cultural or ethnic sense. Talking about the river Volga, he remarked with sarcasm: "It's called 'Great Russian River' – but when you look at who lives along the river, where are the Russians?". For many of my interlocutors, Russia was home to a wide array of non-Russian peoples, including those in the western and northern Caucasus. In addition, it was also a "melting pot" for non-Russians coming from the various corners of the former Soviet Union who were looking for opportunities to make a living outside of their newly independent, but often impoverished republics. In many ways, Russia was thus perceived as the successor to the USSR. When Soviet passports expired, passportisation offered a continuation of the Soviet practice of

multiple citizenship, where those living under the Soviet regime were citizens not only of their respective republic but also of the Soviet supra-state. Receiving a Russian passport was therefore an – albeit less convenient – way of dealing with the sudden transformation of intra-state lines into international borders. As Daur noted, "[t]hey say the Soviet Union was a prison of peoples but it was easier to cross borders. […] In the past I used to be in Moscow in two hours. Today, I need to keep in mind that I have to cross the border and that I need to bring the Russian passport. The Abkhazian passport isn't of any use there [sighs]."

Flexible citizenship was also facilitated by a certain cultural, or more specifically, linguistic competency. Given Abkhazia's diverse ethnic make-up, Russian continued to be widely recognised as a lingua franca. As such, it was not primarily perceived in ethno-cultural terms, i.e. as belonging exclusively to ethnic Russians. In addition to those for whom Russian continued to function as a so-called "second native language", there remained a significant number of Abkhaz people whose command of Abkhaz was more limited and for whom Russian was their first language, even though they still referred to Abkhaz as their conceptual mother tongue. According to my contact Kamilla, who falls into the latter category, the war had a highly negative impact on her ability to speak Abkhaz: "I am from a post-war generation that doesn't speak Abkhaz, although I understand almost everything and can also read and write. I am not quite sure why I missed out, but you know, I grew up right after the war. My parents had other things to worry about." At that time, teaching at school was underdeveloped and Abkhaz was mostly taught at home. That she later transferred from a Russian to an Abkhaz school did not help, since teaching in Abkhaz schools was – and still is – conducted in Russian from the fifth grade. When she started university, she attended Abkhaz language classes for two years, but the level was low and she did not make any significant progress.

Outside of the spheres of education, fluency in Russian was also reinforced by the continued exposure to Russian tourists. Despite the large-scale destruction of the infrastructure during the war, tourists from Russia began to return to Abkhazia for summer vacations from the early 2000s onwards. Many of my Abkhaz interlocutors hosted Russian tourists during the summer months, some of whom had been coming for years, sometimes even since Soviet times. Their annual arrival thus revived connections to people and places which once belonged to a single Soviet "civilization". As Daur told me, "[f]or the residents of Abkhazia, the Russians who

come here are not perceived as foreigners. For most of my life, we lived in a common state and for me … I don't associate them with being foreigners."

The construction of Russia as "multinational" helps to understand why the Russian influence constitutes less of a threat than any possible "Georgification". It was, however, only in 2008, after the Russo-Georgian war in South Ossetia, that the "partnership" with Russia solidified. It was thus the reality of Georgian military action, although not experienced directly, that pushed Abkhazia even closer to Russia. In January 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili replaced Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgia's president following the 2003 Rose Revolution. At his inauguration, Saakashvili declared Georgia's territorial integrity "the goal of his life" and announced his aim to hold the next presidential inauguration in Sukhumi. From the outset, his vision had a military undertone: "I do not want to use troops in Abkhazia, but we should have strong economy and army to restore territorial integrity", Saakashvili stated (Civil Georgia 2004).

The Georgian government first demonstrated its determination to restore constitutional order by force in July 2006 when a police and security operation was conducted in the upper Kodori valley, a part of Abkhazia that was – at least nominally – under Georgian control but had been *de facto* ruled by a local Svan – Emzar Kvitsiani – and his militia. After unsuccessful negotiations, Georgian troops forcefully regained control over the area by the end of July 2006 (ICG 2006). Around two years later, in 2008, an even more ambitious military initiative was launched in South Ossetia. During the night of 7-8 August, Georgian forces started to bomb the regional capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, in response to what they claimed were repeated attacks of Georgian villages. Within hours, Russian troops entered Georgian territory, allegedly to protect Russian citizens, including Russian peacekeepers stationed in the region and ordinary residents holding Russian citizenship. In the course of its intervention, Russian military moved far beyond the borders of South Ossetia into Georgian territory and – entering through Abkhazia – went as far as the port of Poti on the Black Sea coast (ICG 2009, 2–3).

Although the fighting primarily took place in South Ossetia, it nevertheless triggered deep-seated war traumata among the population in Abkhazia. According to Paula Garb (2009, 237–38), who published an analysis of how the events were received in Abkhazia, "the population felt as though the military events in South Ossetia were actually happening in Abkhazia. One reason was the sense of shared

victimhood [...]. The events in South Ossetia and the fear of becoming the next target triggered a wartime psychological trauma experienced during all or part of the Georgia–Abkhazia war of the early 1990s." Abkhazians were particularly frightened by the lack of concern for their safety by Western powers. As the Abkhaz academic Oleg Damenia (quoted in Khashig 2008, n.p.) put it: "After the West did not react for several days to the Georgian artillery levelling of Tskhinval, it became completely obvious to us that nobody needs either the Abkhaz or the Ossetians. No one except Russia is planning to defend us. That's why we are accepting the big increase in the Russian military presence in Abkhazia calmly. They are guaranteeing our security." Thus, when Russian troops entered Abkhazia on August 10, there was a great sense of relief among the population. With their help, the Georgian troops were quickly expelled from the Kodori valley, giving the Abkhazian authorities full control over the whole territory of Abkhazia.

The relief was even greater when, on August 26, Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In recognising Abkhazia's independence, Russia provided a degree of *ontological* – in addition to physical – security that had not existed before 2008. As Paula Garb (2009, 241) noted, "[i]mmediate security was vital, but Russian diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia was a highly symbolic victory." After over a decade of international isolation, Russia's recognition finally put Abkhazia on the world map – something that many of Abkhazia's residents had hoped for ever since the end of the war in 1993. In practice, however, recognition was accompanied by increased financial, economic and political reliance on Russia. While Russia stopped issuing passports, cooperation intensified in other respects. In a 2010 report, the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2010, 1) speaks of a "deepening dependence": "Abkhazia has become even more dependent on Moscow since Russia's controversial recognition a year and a half ago. Russia is financing half the region's budget, and against vigorous Georgian protests, it is spending $465 million to refurbish existing and build new military installations in the picturesque Black Sea coastal area." In Tracey German's (2016, 156) words, "Moscow confers statehood with one hand, using the language and discourse of statehood, but takes it away with the other."

People on the ground were not blind to Russia's neo-colonial ambitions and its use of Abkhazia to retain influence in the South Caucasus. When lecturing me on the history of Abkhazia, Daur, for instance, stressed that the Russians colonised

Abkhazia in the 19th century and "have stayed until this day", thereby drawing an immediate connection between Russia's presence back then and now. Ethnic Abkhazians were indeed concerned about Russia's influence, politically, economically as well as culturally, thereby attesting to a certain degree of "empire consciousness" (Beissinger 1995). In the previous section we saw how my informant Raul from the Ochamchira district used the proximity to Russia as a strategy to discredit the cultural "purity" of the western (Bzyp) Abkhaz, just like they use the proximity to Georgia to discredit their eastern kin. And yet, the fact that Russia recognised Abkhazia nevertheless seemed to outweigh any reservation. Many of the people I spoke to had no doubt that Russia did not actually care much about the Abkhaz people, but, as one interlocutor put it, "at least Russia did not forget about Abkhazia". That no Western country followed Russia in recognising Abkhazia caused much disappointment among the population. And yet, while Russia's recognition provided a sense of ontological security, this limited recognition at the same time reinforced a what Bar-Tal (2004) has called a siege mentality, i.e. a sense of "us" versus "the rest of the world" – only this time, the "us" included Russia and a small number of other states which had recognised Abkhazia.[89]

5.7. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the rejection of everything Georgian in the post-war period and its impact on the ethnically diverse population on the ground. It showed that boundaries were redrawn through two discourses that were both directed against a Georgian "imperialism". First, there was the hegemonic discourse of Abkhazia as the ancient homeland of the ethnic Abkhaz, which excluded any non-Abkhaz and therefore large parts of Abkhazia's post-war population. But there was also a co-existing discourse of Abkhazia as a multinational place threatened by Georgian imperialists which aimed to impose a homogenous Georgian culture not only on the indigenous population but on all non-Georgian people living in Abkhazia.

It was this discourse that opened up a space for a cross-ethnic alliance that, although fragile and hierarchical (and as such not civic), allowed for the co-existence of the different groups that continued to live in Abkhazia in the aftermath of the war

---

[89] Other countries that currently recognise Abkhazia are Venezuela, Nicaragua, Vanuatu, Nauru and Syria.

and the Georgian displacement. As I have argued, everyone non-Abkhaz was welcome as long as they joined the Abkhaz in their rejection of Georgian imperialism; for non-Abkhaz, loyalty thus came to serve as a substitute for ethnicity. The situation was more difficult for the Georgian (Mingrelian) community residing in Gali. On the one hand, they were increasingly marginalised within Abkhazia, with more and more Gali residents considering leaving Abkhazia for good; on the other hand, strategies were also employed to include them both into the extended self (through "Mingrelianisation") and, more recently, into the ethnic core self (through "Abkhazianisation"), thereby drawing on a complex history of assimilation in a region characterized by an ambiguous borderland culture.

But as I have demonstrated, the Gali residents were not the only Georgians who remained in post-war Abkhazia. There were also the so-called "Mingrelian wives" who, unlike their male counterparts (Georgian men married to Abkhaz women), had been able to stay because they were considered to be loyal to the Abkhaz families of which they were a part. An important role was played by the custom of patrilineal ethnicity, which ensured that their children were categorised as ethnically Abkhaz not only informally but also legally through the continued practice of passport ethnicity. While some contact with relatives across the conflict divide was tolerated by the authorities, a strict border regime was introduced that made it difficult – although not impossible – for the Georgian wives and their children to visit their relatives on the other side of the border and therefore significantly reduced the danger of further "contamination". But as I show, a complete closure was resisted by those concerned who stressed the priority of familial relations over ethno-political issues, thus highlighting the high value placed on family and relatives in the Caucasus.

However, it was not only specific people that came to be associated with ambiguity but also a whole region. Whereas the Gali region has received much attention both within the media and academia, I instead shift the focus to the Ochamchira district, which, due to the legacy of mixed marriages, was looked upon with suspicion. This also created internal friction about the question of what it means to be ethnically "pure" both in terms of its location and practices. For whereas those from central and western Abkhazia looked at the Ochamchira Abkhaz with caution, for my interlocutors from Ochamchira, western Abkhaz were not "pure" either but had come under the increasing influence of Russia. However, in the post-war period,

Russia's influence was widely accepted as less threatening. Thus, the rejection of everything Georgian not only concerned internal dynamics but also Abkhazia's external relations: As previous links with Georgia were negated, relations with Russia were once again tightened. Despite a certain acknowledgment of Russia's neo-colonial ambitions, this rapprochement happened under an anti-imperialist paradigm reminiscent of the early stages of the Soviet Union, when the Bolsheviks pursued an explicit anti-imperialist ideology that allowed them to establish a multi-national "empire".

This chapter therefore leaves us with an impression of how Abkhazia has been purified from "Georgian elements" by following not only the script of ethnicity (Fujii 2009, 12) but also an "internationalist" script. It therefore demonstrates how a discourse of internationalism was not entirely suspended with the collapse of the Soviet state but continued to live on in the post-Soviet period. Of course, this was no longer the "lived internationalism" that my interlocutors described in relation to the Soviet period and it was also one that no longer included the Georgians. Instead, it was a discursive devise that allowed for the ambivalent co-existence of ethnic others. Rather than grounded in actual solidarity, much like ethnicity, it thus functioned as a script that could be invoked without necessarily saying anything about the motives of the specific actors involved. However, as such, it both curtailed and reproduced inter-ethnic mistrust.

In the next chapter, I will continue this ethnographic exploration of the process of disambiguation by investigating the long shadow that the forced expulsion of the Georgian population has cast.

Chapter 6.   Affects of Absence: Shame, Intra-group Resentment and Nostalgia

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how the forced expulsion of the Georgian population was negotiated through a process of disambiguation or "purification". But for the people on the ground – many of whom had close ties with the so-called "enemy" – this was not necessarily a straightforward process. Although it sought to re-create an ideal place free of the Other, the expulsion and absence of a major part of the region's pre-war population nevertheless manifested itself in often unexpected ways, haunting those who stayed behind both literally and metaphorically. As this chapter will show, for many Abkhaz, "out of sight" was not necessarily "out of mind".

The aim of this chapter is therefore to interrogate the limits of collective victimhood: As I have shown in previous chapters, there was a strong sense among ethnic Abkhazians that the mass displacement of the Georgian population was a justified punitive response to violence and the violations committed by the Georgian troops and their local supporters and therefore an inevitable result of Georgian aggression. Research in social psychology suggests that instead of acknowledgment and guilt, denial is a common reaction to atrocities committed by the in-group (S. Cohen 2001). According to Bandura (1999), perpetrators tend to use various moral disengagement strategies, such as moral justification and dehumanisation, to cognitively restructure the harmful conduct into an acceptable one. But to what extent can we also find moments of moral *re*-engagement? To what extent did doubts about the rightfulness of what happened surface?

More broadly, the chapter examines the various ways in which the absence of the Georgian population manifests itself. As anthropologists Elizabeth Dunn and Martin Frederiksen (2014, 242) have noted, "absent things leave voids that are often the constant subjects of attention and discussion in Georgia. From breakaway provinces to homes destroyed by war, from statues to jars of fruit, […] all these absent things have looming presences that shape present-day Georgia." Conversely, this chapter asks: to what extent is the absence of those who were displaced felt in Abkhazia and how? It particularly looks at the engagement with material remains and reminders, for even though the majority of the Georgians who lived in Abkhazia

are no longer physically present, Abkhazians still live with their material legacy in the form of houses and other spaces that they once inhabited.

The chapter is divided into five sections. Sections 1-3 explore how victimisation is challenged by looking at the moral discourse surrounding the so-called "trophy houses", that is Georgian houses that have been appropriated by Abkhaz in the course of the violent conflict, a phenomenon that was widely condemned by my contacts as a violation the Abkhaz moral code. I then analyse how my informants made sense of this counter-discourse and whether it has the potential to undermine the narrative of victimisation and, ultimately, national identity. I argue that while the stories around the trophy houses reveal as well as reproduce divisions that have come to be characteristic of post-war Abkhazia, they are also an expression of an intimate knowledge and thus function as "true" markers of national belonging.

Section 4 continues to analyse the social and cultural effects of displacement and depopulation on the remaining ethnic Abkhazian residents. In particular, I focus on interactions between "old" and "new" inhabitants of Sukhumi (many of whom moved into the trophy houses), carving out the tensions that arose between co-ethnics as a consequence of internal migration and the feelings of loss and longing for one's old neighbours, including Georgians, that emerged as a result – feelings that were fostered by a certain sense of "ethnic claustrophobia" due to depopulation and isolation. This claustrophobia manifests itself in a longing to get away from "one's own" in order to "relax". As I argue in section 5, this intra-ethnic fatigue was reinforced by fear of betrayal and widespread mistrust, which, I argue, became characteristic of post-war relations among ethnic Abkhazians.

6.1.   Limits of victimhood: the Georgian "trophy house"[90]

As Gerard Toal and Carl Dahlman (2011) demonstrated in their study of the re-making of post-war Bosnia, ethnic cleansing is not only about removing "an ethnically defined group from one territory to a perceived external homeland" (Ther 2012, 143) in a narrow sense. The appropriation of what is left behind constitutes a fundamental part of how power relations are reorganised:

> Housing, land, and valuables are stolen from victims. Businesses and factory jobs are suddenly vacated and available to those who want to

---

[90] Sections 1-3 of this chapter have been published as an article (Peinhopf 2020).

profit from the new ethnocratic order. This entrepreneurial violence seizes power and frees up assets that are distributed to buy the complicity of those marginally or not directly involved in the coup de violence. Widespread denial of the founding moment of violence follows as the new order consolidates itself. (Toal and Dahlman 2011, 116–17)

What makes displacement violent is therefore not only physical assault or the threat thereof, but also what comes after: the take-over of people's homes. When the Georgians fled Abkhazia, they had to evacuate their properties, and although some of their dwellings were burned down, often with only the staircase left standing, others remained intact.[91] Known as "trophy houses" (*trofeinye doma*), or "trophy flats" *(trofeinye kvartiry)*, they were appropriated by ethnic Abkhazians as a reward for defeating the enemy. While the term "trophy" was generally used to refer to all kinds of objects left behind by the Georgians upon their defeat, there was a peculiar violence to the act of appropriating people's houses. According to anthropologists Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995, 2), there is an intimate link between the house and the body: "The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect."

A survey conducted in 2010 among displaced Georgians confirmed that the thought of one's house being occupied by other people was indeed unbearable for many. According to the report based on the survey, "[n]early half [of the respondents] resent that other people live in their houses, and one in eight would rather see the house destroyed than someone else living in it, possibly preferring their 'own ruins' to an intact house currently owned by others" (Grono 2011, 12). And yet, as my fieldwork revealed, it was not only the displaced who struggled to come to terms with the occupation of their properties. During the months I spent in Abkhazia, my interlocutors regularly and often unexpectedly voiced their disapproval of the occupation of trophy houses. For instance, when discussing the difficult housing situation in Sukhumi, one of my close contacts, an Abkhaz man in his early 70s, told me that even if he was given the opportunity, he would not want to live in a Georgian flat. When I asked for his reasons, he explained:

---

[91] Georgians were not the only victims of the illegal acquisition of their property. Many Russians who fled during the war and returned afterwards also found their properties occupied but were often, but not always, able to reclaim them (see, e.g., Glebovski 2019).

> Why not? The Mingrelians who work at the markets in Moscow, they curse the Abkhaz who took over Georgian property, they only wish us the worst! . . . For me it's about bad energy (*plokhaia energetika*), do you understand? Others don't care, but I think it's bad . . . To live in somebody else's house, to take over somebody else's property, something somebody else has worked for his whole life, I don't want that. I am not that kind of person; that's not how I've been raised.

Telling me about his attempt to convince his family to acquire a trophy house, another one of my informants—an Abkhaz man in his late 30s—made a similar point:

> Everyone in my family was categorically against it . . . I actually challenged them and said: "These people have been fighting against us, they have been killing us, why can't we take their houses?" But my uncle kept saying, "These walls will curse us!" For him, somebody else's house was somebody else's work (*chuzhoi trud*); he was convinced that we would be able to succeed on our own, not relying on other people's things. Eventually, I did get a flat in Sukhum, but it was in one of those apartment blocks that were being built when the war started and so no one had lived there before. In that sense, I acquired only "naked walls".

These excerpts from my field notes illustrate how despite the high degree of hostility vis-à-vis the Georgians, and particularly the displaced, the idea of living in their former homes – the most personal space imaginable – did cause great unease among certain Abkhaz people. Strikingly similar to what anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 191) observed in Northern Cyprus, where former Greek houses now inhabited by Turkish Cypriots "are always tinged with anxiety, arising from their past ownership", the trophy house in Abkhazia seemed to discharge negative affects, in particular shame, that were absent from the public discourse. Unlike the omnipresent monuments and billboards that commemorate Abkhazian war heroes and the portraits of lost husbands and sons that decorate people's homes, reminding them of their own victimhood, the trophy houses appeared to be material reminders of a moral transgression and therefore a threat to collective victimhood.

As becomes clear from my interlocutors' statements, such emotions were not only sustained through the material presence of trophy houses, but also through widely-held "magical", or "superstitious" beliefs, which have a long tradition among the Abkhaz (see Dbar 2000; Tarba 2008) and also played their role in the context of the conflict. During my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors told me that they believed that the displaced had cursed the Abkhaz and that this has adversely

affected Abkhaz society.[92] As one of my interlocutors put it, "they [the displaced] burn candles in their homes and wish us the worst [. . .] We have suffered a lot because of that." Many seemed to believe that those who occupied trophy houses were particularly prone to bad luck.[93] Stories were circulating about families that suffered as a result: for example, one contact told me about a trophy house not far from Sukhumi that was abandoned even though it had been fully renovated by its post-war inhabitants, who had planned to turn it into a hotel. However, after a series of tragic events that happened to the occupants, it came to be regarded as "unfortunate" (*neschastnyi*) and was shunned not only by the family concerned but by everyone in the neighbourhood.

While I was not able to establish the extent to which these magical rituals had actually been exercised, the fact that many of my interlocutors strongly believed in their power demonstrated that those who were displaced continued to pose a threat in spite of the physical separation. In some ways, the curses became a convenient excuse for many of the negative events that happened in post-war Abkhazia, such as the rising number of fatal car accidents. But the distress surrounding the trophy houses was more than the result of an externally imposed fear of revenge; it was also grounded in genuine doubts about the morality of the appropriation. One interlocutor, for instance, explained that one of the reasons why his father opposed the acquisition of a trophy house was that he had grown up in Sukhumi and was therefore personally acquainted with many of the former Georgian inhabitants. This implied that the act of appropriation was somewhat easier for those coming from other regions who were unfamiliar with the local social fabric.[94] Like Rebecca Bryant (2014a, 685) observed in the context of the conflict in Cyprus, the act of appropriation caused not only a violation of "the intimacy of the home", but also of "relations of interdependency in the village" or, in our case, the city. As we can see, this violation was not only felt among the displaced but to some extent also among those who stayed behind.

---

[92] Toal and Frichova Grono (2011, 666) made a similar observation, noting that "[a] few Abkhaz analysts admit that issues of IDP property loom over the Abkhaz society, which will have to face them sooner or later."

[93] Bryant (2014a, 687) similarly observes that some Turkish Cypriots refused to loot because they feared that the objects could carry a curse.

[94] After the war, many ethnic Abkhazians, especially those from the eastern regions of Ochamchira and Tkvarcheli, moved westwards to areas that had been less dramatically affected by the war and/or were closer to urban settlements, such as Gagra and Sukhumi.

At the same time, distress did not necessarily depend on knowledge of the previous owners. For many, it was primarily grounded in a concern about how the appropriation of Georgian property reflected on Abkhaz identity more broadly. In their understanding, acquiring a trophy house was a violation of the Abkhaz moral code; they stressed that "this is not the way we do it (*po-nashenski*)," or "this is not in accordance with our principles (*poniatiia*)." Therefore, rather than feeling guilt vis-à-vis the displaced and their suffering, they were consumed by shame vis-à-vis *their own group*. In their view, whatever the circumstances, a true Abkhaz is not supposed to take "what is not his". According to Abkhaz custom, there are certain rules for how the enemy should be treated (see Inal-Ipa 1960; Benet 1974). This is well illustrated in one of the short stories by the Abkhazian author Fazil Iskander. In *The Tale of Old Khabug's Mule*, Iskander (1983) describes how the protagonist Sandro shows his father a house which is for sale. When the old man realises that the previous owners, a Greek couple, had been arrested by the Soviet authorities and deported to Siberia, and that the house was now offered by the city council to the "most deserving" people, his mood changes instantly:

> "My son," he began in a quiet and terrible voice, "before, if a blood avenger killed his enemy, he touched not a button on his clothes. He took the body to the enemy's house, laid it on the ground, and called to his family for them to take in their dead man clean, undefiled by the touch of an animal. That's the way it was. These men, now, kill innocent people and tear their clothes off them to sell cheap to their lackeys. You can buy this house, but I will never set foot in it, nor will you ever cross the threshold of my house!" (Iskander 1983, 252)

While the very act of punishment seemed to follow the Abkhaz code of honor at least to some extent, it had to be performed according to a cultural code that did not include the take-over of alien property. In contrast to the heroic act of the liberation of the "homeland" that strengthened Abkhazian identity as a proud "warrior people", the appropriation of people's *homes* was perceived as disgraceful, especially in the case of those who took more than they actually needed, and hence harmful to the image of the group as a whole. It was one thing to punish someone, but another to *materially benefit* from it, which created a unique causal link between the position of the occupier and the suffering of the displaced.

References to the trophy house thus invoked a discourse of civility that challenged the absolute innocence of the Abkhaz people. In doing so, it helped to

moderate relations across the conflict divide – something that I was able to witness first-hand on a trip to one of Abkhazia's remote mountain areas, where my Abkhaz host took me to visit a Georgian couple he knew from before the war. Although they had fled and were now based in Tbilisi, the couple managed to keep their house in Abkhazia and continued to visit it regularly. Nevertheless, my host had not seen them since the war, so when we arrived and sat down at the table, the woman asked awkwardly: "How have you been doing?" Hesitating for a moment, my Abkhaz contact replied, "Well . . . I was studying at the Institute, and then, after the war, I remained in the village and started a family. We bought a small house at the other side of the village . . . *I didn't want to take a trophy house and I also made sure that no one in our family did*." By introducing the topic of the trophy house at the outset of the conversation, he indicated that although he and his hosts might inevitably find themselves on different sides of the conflict divide, there were certain lines that he would not cross. Thus, in order to demonstrate the moral integrity of his family, he distanced them from those who engaged in looting. But by doing so, he was not disassociating himself and his family from the in-group; instead, he asserted their identity as "true" Abkhaz.

6.2.   The "new Abkhaz": from inter- to intra-ethnic conflict

At the same time, the disapproval of the trophy house was not only driven by a sense of violation vis-à-vis the displaced, but also an injustice committed by members of the in-group against their own. First, having become victims of Georgian aggression and, second, having missed out in a process of post-displacement redistribution of property that came to be seen as deeply unfair, for many, the post-war period was in fact characterised by a sense of double victimisation. Therefore, while the trophy house constitutes a key site at which the conflict between Georgians and Abkhaz played out in its most intimate ways, it also forms the centre of another, intra-group struggle over who can rightfully claim abandoned property, raising not only questions of ownership but also of collective identity.

My interlocutors generally remembered the redistribution of property as a chaotic and unregulated process that happened according to what came to be known as the *printsip zaniato* (occupied principle). On a "first come, first served" basis, people entered homes and claimed informal ownership by writing *zaniato*

(occupied) at the entrance gate or on the walls of a dwelling. In this process, people occupied not only so-called "Georgian houses", but all kinds of valuable properties, including sanatoriums and industrial enterprises. The anarchic re-distribution of these properties raised questions about redistributive justice directed no longer at the Georgian "enemy", but their own people. As an Abkhaz man in his late 60s recalled,

> The [occupation of] Georgian houses was one thing, but some people occupied whole rest homes or factories. Take the hotel *Inter-Sukhum* as an example . . . I remember, after the war I went inside and saw a couple of guys sitting there. I asked them, "What were you fighting for? For the hotel or your homeland?" They hadn't built anything themselves, not paid a single penny; I don't see how they deserved it. Why do they deserve it and I don't?

That concerns over the treatment of Georgians were often overshadowed by a preoccupation with one's own perceived marginalised position in the new post-war order became particularly evident when I was picked up outside an apartment block by a taxi driver with whom I had been in regular contact, an Abkhaz man in his late 50s from the mining town of Tkvarcheli. When he arrived, he stopped and looked around suspiciously. After a short silence, he said, "Georgians used to live here. There were no Abkhaz here before the war." However, what first struck me as pity for the displaced soon turned out to be *self*-pity: he explained to me that, having left for Russia after the war, he returned to Abkhazia at a time when "everything was already taken". Now he barely earned enough money to rent a room on the outskirts of Sukhumi and provide for his family. Looking at the relatively well-maintained apartment bloc, he seemed primarily consumed with resentment towards those who managed to get "a slice of the action". When an expensive SUV with a young man in the driver's seat drove around the corner, he shouted: "Did your father sell a couple of Georgian houses and buy you a fancy car?! Fascists (*fashisty*)!"

A 2008 performance by the popular group of Abkhaz comedians *Narty iz Abkhazii*, which one of my close contacts posted on Facebook, further illustrates this dynamic. Titled *mistika v trofeinom dome* (supernatural phenomena in the trophy house) (Vakhtang 2017), it depicts the suffering of an Abkhaz occupant of a trophy house, who is haunted by the spirit of its former inhabitants. It begins with a conversation between the new occupants, an Abkhaz man and his—as it is later revealed —Mingrelian wife about how lucky they are with their new home:

> Husband [in Abkhaz]: "Holy moly, what a great house . . . Are you
> listening to me? I've never seen such a house!"
> Wife [in Russian]: "Yes, if our house hadn't been burnt down during the
> war, we'd still live in that henhouse [*kuriatnik*] and not in these
> mansions [*khoromi*]!"
> Husband [in Russian]: "Thank God that it was burnt down [crosses
> himself]!" [audience laughs].

After the couple goes to bed, the husband awakes to strange, ghost-like noises. Suddenly, a voice asks, [Russian with Mingrelian accent] "Isn't life good in someone else's house, yes?" [laughter, applause]. In panic, the husband turns to his wife, who can't hear anything herself:

> Husband [in Abkhaz] to his wife: "Ey you, what's with you, didn't you
> hear just now??"
> Wife [in Russian]: "No, what's wrong with you?!"
> Husband [screams in panic]: "Who is there??"
> "The owner, the owner, the owner . . ."
> Husband [screaming]: "What owner?? Listen, I am the owner here!"
> "The former, the former, the former . . ."

At the end of the performance, the husband is about to fall asleep to a modified version of the famous Soviet-era lullaby "The Tired Toys Are Sleeping" (*spiat ustal'ie igrushki*), performed by the spirits: "Asleep are the tired Abkhaz, together they sleep . . . ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, on our blankets and pillows they sleep, may you go to hell [. . .] In this house you go to bed, so that you dream of us at night, your eyes closed and never open again." When the Abkhaz occupant realises that it is in fact a death spell, he awakes and jumps up in panic.

The performance, which was videotaped and uploaded to YouTube in 2017, caused much outrage among Georgians, who saw it as a confirmation of Abkhaz "ruthlessness" and "moral decline".[95] However, in the perception of my interlocutors, the performance was not mocking the plight of the former owner, but that of the Abkhaz inhabitant who had enriched himself and was now haunted by an evil spirit. A local journalist explained to me:

> Internally, the topic of trophy houses has always aroused gossip.
> Depending on the circumstances certain people occupied certain
> properties: For example, if their own house was burnt down by Georgians
> during the war, and there were thousands such cases, then such an

---

[95] See Vakhtang (2017) for comments on YouTube.

"exchange" was seen as just [...] But when someone occupied five houses, and then sold them, then they were made fun of, but within their own circle. And those folks who made the performance, they brought the topic to the surface. And that's unique, because it is one of the most closed intra-Abkhaz discourses.

What the performance therefore depicts is a new *internal* other: ethnic Abkhazians who enriched themselves by taking over Georgian properties. In doing so, it illustrates how appropriation could evoke schadenfreude about the plight of those benefitting from the acquisition of trophy houses not only among the displaced, but – albeit for different reasons – also among co-ethnics. In this context, it is the Abkhaz who did not materially gain from the war who sympathise with the displaced in their pursuit of vengeance against a new, privileged segment of society. Similar to the "new Russians" who are said to have become rich by dubious means and are known for their lavish lifestyles, in Abkhazia war and displacement produced a class of so-called "new Abkhaz" (*novye abkhaztsy*), who – together with their expensive cars – came to symbolise the emergence of an unprecedented, overt materialism at the expense of the traditional Abkhaz values of modesty, humility and self-restraint.

That "values have changed" was one of the most frequent statements during my fieldwork. As one interlocutor explained,

Nowadays, the value of a person is judged according to the car he owns and suit he wears. Some people ask me, "Aren't you ashamed to drive a car like that? You used to have a Mercedes." I tell them, "A car is a means of transportation. What difference does it make if it's a Mercedes or a Lada?" I'd rather be a good person and have brains. What does the car bring you if you are an idiot? [...] You know, it would be different if any of these people driving black cars today had earned the money they were spending.

To many of my interlocutors, these new forms of inequality seemed to violate the promise that armed resistance would not only end "Georgian domination", but lead to the creation of a just and equal Abkhazian society. As an older Abkhaz woman once joked, the Abkhaz had in some ways become just like the Georgians: "The Abkhaz are a nation that likes to adopt bad things from others. For example, the Georgians who lived here had a good life and were working – what we took from them is the 'showing off' but not the working [laughs]." Similarly to what both Bryant (2010) and Navaro-Yashin (2012) observed in Northern Cyprus, there was a sense that post-war looting has corrupted the community, leading to a culture of

occupation, in which possessions were simply taken rather than earned through one's own work. For those who saw themselves as the material "losers" of the transition, especially for members of the so-called intelligentsia, distancing themselves from the trophy house (and other status symbols like expensive cars) was therefore a way to restore or retain moral integrity in a drastically changing environment, allowing them to feel like the "moral" winners while also belonging to a "true" Abkhaz identity.

Others, however, sought to turn the "occupied principle" upside down. In contrast to older members of the intelligentsia who have protested the distribution of property by distancing themselves from Georgian property, recent years have also witnessed several cases of "recursive occupation". These were cases of young families – often from rural backgrounds and with little education and no family support – who had come to the capital in the hope for better employment but struggled to find accommodation. Finding themselves without state assistance for young families or access to financial services, they decided to take matters into their own hands by occupying houses which others had acquired through occupation during and after the war (Sharia 2017; JAMnews 2016b). For the members of this so-called "lost generation", who have little or no memory of peaceful pre-war cohabitation and neighbourliness, and who struggle to establish a livelihood, there seemed to be limited capacity and incentive to empathise with the displaced, who, in their view, could at least rely on the support of the Georgian government. At the same time, socio-cultural and socio-economic disadvantage also alienated them from certain segments of their in-group, including the "old Abkhazians" – whose values they could not afford – as well as the "new Abkhaz", whose wealth they did not share. As a journalist (JAMnews 2016b, n.p.) commented,

> in the opinion of the younger generation, a post-war redistribution of property is illegitimate. They didn't take part in it for obvious reasons. Now, they suggest making yet another redistribution of property, and they can't understand, why they aren't allowed to do what the older generation was allowed to do. It's senseless to tell those young people that they have hands and feet, so they can earn for their own home. First of all, it's not true – there is nowhere they could earn money, since the labour market in Abkhazia is minimal. Secondly, in this case the government can't demand life success from the young people, because it hasn't actually provided them with anything – either education or opportunities for development. It's that very "lost generation" and someone should pay the price for it.

6.3.   From narrative to narration: making sense of the counter-discourse

The previous sections testified to significant cleavages among the Abkhaz, showing how, rather than simply "purifying" society, the removal of the adversary can significantly affect the social structure and culture of the remaining group and lead to changes that potentially threaten the very cohesion that it was meant to produce, thus pointing to the significance of socio-economic inequality as a driver of conflict. But what are the implications of this? To what extent does the counter-discourse— and the underlying cleavages that it depicts—have the potential to undermine collective identity?

In order to fully understand the significance of narratives, it is necessary to look beyond the content as such and shift the focus from *what* is said to the act of storytelling itself. From the analysis so far, it becomes clear that the critical counter-discourse fulfils important performative functions for my interlocutors, both within the group and across groups. As I have shown earlier, it facilitates communication across the conflict divide by signalling respect for basic moral principles of inter-group behaviour that apply even in situations of conflict. At the same time, distancing themselves from the trophy house also allowed them to elevate their status *within* the group. Therefore, although the critical moral discourse appeared to exclude certain members from the group by claiming that they were not "true Abkhazians", it did not challenge the boundary of the group as such. The material presented also suggests that the "new Abkhaz" are seen as part of a more complex story that evoked some sympathy, as it was often stressed that given the extent of displacement that many Abkhaz experienced at the hands of the Georgian troops, certain "people had no choice" but to move into vacant property (see also Dale 1997, 100–101). This is also evident in the afore-mentioned comedy performance, where the statement that "if our house hadn't been burnt down during the war, we'd still live in that henhouse and not in these mansions" clarifies from the outset that it was not simply greed, but their own loss, that drove the couple to occupy a "trophy". As a member of the intelligentsia and native of Sukhumi put it, "Today many people don't live in their own house (*v svoem dome*). This is not only unfortunate for those who left, but also for those who stayed . . . Because it means that someone was either forced to leave

or was killed. […] But I don't judge those people who moved into abandoned houses; they needed a place to stay."[96]

Some sympathy was even expressed vis-à-vis those who did have a choice. Here, the second part of the statements made at the beginning of the comedy performance gives an important cue, as the audience not only learns that the couple had lost its own house prior to appropriating a "trophy", but that their own dwelling was poor in comparison (a "henhouse"). Alluding to a larger discourse of Georgian imperial exploitation, it is indicated that among those who benefitted from the war were many who, despite their titular status, had previously occupied a marginalised position. This was also reflected in my interlocutors' narratives, which stressed that unlike the Abkhaz, the Georgians living in Abkhazia "had a great life". As one Abkhaz contact put it, when the Abkhaz "came down from the villages in the mountains and went into the mansions owned by Georgians, seeing the luxury they were not just shocked, but *appalled* (*v uzhase*)." Thus, my interlocutors managed to integrate the "new Abkhaz" into the larger logic of victimhood and the fate of the Abkhaz more generally. Unlike the Georgians, whose negative behaviour appeared only to confirm existing prejudice, ethnic Abkhazians were seen as corrupted by circumstances but fundamentally good. Negative experiences were rationalised through the hardship that the Abkhaz people had been through and were hence seen as part of a "common fate".

Finally, despite people's constant talk about feelings of estrangement from the people around them, the very fact that the stories of the trophy houses were being told over and over by people across Abkhazia also suggests that they themselves had become constitutive of Abkhazia's post-war identity. While the laments around the trophy houses draw attention to substantial intra-group divisions as well as some of the group's "dark sides", in my reading it is exactly for this reason that they also function as intimate markers of collective belonging. As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005) has argued, it is precisely the "embarrassing stuff" – and not the official national culture presented to outsiders – that glues people together, forming the basis of what he has famously termed "cultural intimacy". This helps to explain why people were both reluctant and eager to tell these stories: they were reluctant because they did not like an outsider to know "the dark sides" of their

---

[96] Navaro-Yashin (2012, 156) observed a similar distinction between those who occupied Greek property out of need (such as refugees from the south who had lost their own property) and those who looted to acquire wealth among Turkish Cypriots.

community, but at the same time they wanted to share these stories precisely because they constituted "true" insider knowledge that only they, as non-elite actors, were in a position to reveal – whether they admitted to having actively participated in the looting or not, these stories marked them as insiders.[97] Although the laments presented the occupation of Georgian homes as a threat to, and in opposition to Abkhaz culture ("this is not who we really are"), as a reflection of the fundamental changes that the group has been through and the struggles that this involved, they, in fact, seemed to constitute a more intimate and authentic representation of the culture of a community that both experienced and perpetrated violence.

The notion of cultural intimacy might also explain the, at times, hysterical laughter with which the audience reacted to the comedy performance. While I have so far focused mainly on the script, much of the outrage among Georgian viewers was directed at the audience's overt amusement, which seemed to signal a shocking lack of empathy. Based on my interlocutors' reactions, I, in contrast, highlighted the *self*-mocking nature of the spectacle. But while self-mockery is certainly a form of criticism, it also inevitably contains an element of sympathy or affection. As Herzfeld (2005, 29) put it, "[n]ational embarrassment can become the iconic basis of intimacy and affection, a fellowship of the flawed, within the private spaces of national culture." In my reading, then, the hysterical laughter that some scenes provoked was grounded in the "rueful self-recognition" (2005, 6) that constitutes the core of cultural intimacy and is always also affectionate, causing both embarrassment (e.g. "look at how greedy we've become!") and secret pride (e.g. "look at how we made the best of a terrible situation!"). Thus, when the spirit says "Isn't life good in someone else's house," it is as much a social critique as it is an affirmation of Abkhaz (post-war) identity.

6.4.   Urbanisation, loss and the nostalgia for "old Sukhum"

Wartime destruction and the evacuation of Georgian properties (and those owned by members of other nationalities) triggered a process of internal migration – in particular urbanisation – of the remaining, mostly ethnic Abkhazian population. Especially those from the heavily war-affected regions of eastern Abkhazia moved

---

[97] In fact, looting became such a pervasive feature of the post-war economy that it was almost impossible for anyone not to be implicated in one way or another.

westwards towards the capital of Sukhumi, leaving some, mostly rural, areas more depopulated than others.[98] These rapid changes in the population significantly affected the social and cultural fabric of many places, including the capital of Sukhumi. According to one of my interlocutors, post-war "Sukhum" did not only change "in terms of nationality, but also in terms of social status and the quantity of people. It all changed in a very short time."[99] In this section I will explore the understudied phenomenon of "co-ethnic migration" (Čapo Žmegač, Voß, and Roth 2010) and its impact on the places of resettlement. In particular, I will look at the tensions that arose between "old" inhabitants and "new" ones who had moved into the houses abandoned by Georgians, and the feelings of estrangement and loss that this could produce despite shared bonds of ethnicity and victimhood.

As mentioned earlier, the war brought to the fore significant socio-economic divisions between urban settlements along the coastline and villages, or, to be more precise, between "lower" and "upper" Abkhazia. Although the village was usually portrayed as the cradle of authentic Abkhaz culture, i.e. as a place where people live in accordance with traditional customs, this imagination concealed issues of inequality, poverty and underdevelopment. As one interlocutor put it, Soviet Abkhazia was very modernised along the coastline, but, "a few kilometres into the mountains, and it [civilisation] already ended. It was a different world." After the war, when ethnic Abkhazians from the villages moved to the city, socio-economic and cultural differences that were previously overshadowed by *inter*-ethnic conflict began to manifest themselves in often unexpected ways, as the following statements by two of my key interlocutors, one from Sukhumi and the other one originally from a village in the Ochamchira district who had lived in the capital for most of his adult life, illustrate:

> After the war, a lot of people from the villages moved to Sukhum. I remember how one of my neighbours threw the rubbish out of the window on the 5th floor, just like that. I walked up to the woman and asked her why she was doing that. First she denied it but I told her that I saw exactly where the rubbish came from. I asked her from which village she was from and whether she behaved the same way there. 'No', she said. [...] You know, according to the traditional way of life in Abkhaz villages, the first thing you do in the morning is to clean the yard. [...] Perhaps they

---

[98] This is reflected in the official census data: While the overall population of the capital Sukhumi more than halved from 119,150 in 1989 to 43,716 in 2003, the number of ethnic Abkhazians rose from 14,922 to 24,603 and therefore from 12.5% to 56.3% (Ethno-Kavkaz, n.d.).

[99] After the war, Sukhumi was renamed "Sukhum".

believed that living in the city did not require them to abide by the same rules? They thought they would become urbanites simply by moving, but no, being an urbanite is an inner attitude, it is a certain mentality, not simply a matter of location. (Oleg)

Today there is a new way of life and the people who live here express a different behaviour and culture. They did not integrate into what already existed but introduced new forms of behaviour. What happened is a so-called process of "urbanisation". [...] During Soviet times, for example, if you wanted to cut down a tree, you had to seek permission at a specifically designated institution. Nowadays, you can do whatever you want. If someone feels like a tree is disturbing their view, they just cut it. For people from the village, it is difficult to understand what is wrong with it. Because they can just go into the woods and cut down any tree they want. Of course, this is an extreme example. (Daur)

While my interlocutors expressed sympathy for the fate of the post-war newcomers to the city – many of whom had been victims of displacement by the Georgians –, they were also criticised for their failure to adapt to the city's established lifestyle and local identity of the *Sukhumchanin* or *Sukhumchanka*. For example, when asked by *Sputnik Abkhazia* – one of the region's most popular news outlets – how life in the city had changed, an Abkhaz woman explained:

I lived in pre-war Sukhum until I was 18 years old. More precisely, the war started when I was 18 years old. At that time the city was sunny, the people were all familiar. Everything resembled a warm, cosy house. Now the city is not like this at all. The most important reason for that is, of course, the war. Many things and places in the city remind of it. Moreover … I don't want to insult those people who moved to Sukhum after the war, not at all. But when I walked through the city in the past, I could recognise every citizen by face. In 98% of the cases I could tell whether this or that person I encountered came from another city. It felt like a family. And *Suchumchane*, it seems to me, related to their city better and with more love. (quoted in Voitsekhovskii 2017, n.p.)

This parallels experiences in other post-war cities, such as Sarajevo, where anthropologist Ivana Macek (2009) observed how, during the city's siege, locals blamed newcomers of the same ethnicity for the loss of the city's distinct identity. Shared ethnicity alone did not suffice to create intimacy; according to Macek (2009, 87), "[i]nteractions between natives and newcomers were distant, fragile, and sometimes hostile. Belonging to the same national group did not make strangers feel alike, akin, or secure with one another." Instead, she argues, "natives often blamed the newcomers, together with those who had left, for the loss of what they called

Sarajevanness, a local identity that also became a moral quality whose central component was knowing how to live in an ethnoreligiously blended town."

In the case of Sukhumi, there was a similar sense of frustration around the newcomers' failure to adopt a pre-war urban lifestyle. According to my contact Daur, after the war, urban co-existence became "unpredictable":

> Before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the war, there were certain traditions and principles of behaviour for members of all nationalities living in Sukhumi. In contrast to today, people's behaviour was predictable. The way of life (*obraz zhizn'*) of the city of Sukhum was different from that of other cities such as Moscow or Leningrad. If I met a stranger, I could easily tell whether he was from Sukhum. After the war, these norms and values which regulated people's behaviour were strongly violated. Today, there are already different values .... However, I wouldn't say that things changed for the better. It has become psychologically difficult to live in the city.

However, the problem was not simply that those newcomers brought their rural customs to the city. Even urban Abkhaz were usually strongly connected to the village and therefore familiar with the rural lifestyle. More importantly, the war itself had fundamentally altered people's behaviour. Poverty, destruction and trauma thus aggravated existing socio-economic differences: in addition to being perceived as "backwards", many of those who moved from the village to the city had been brutalised. It was a recurring statement during my fieldwork that "war changes people"; according to one of my contacts who fought in the war, "[i]f you see violence every day, it changes you. It makes people mean." Moreover, war, violence and poverty not only had a fundamental impact on those who fought, but also on younger generations and especially children. That there was a whole new generation of people who knew nothing but war greatly affected the atmosphere in the city, which became a place of *survival*. In fact, there was not much urban culture left to adapt to. According to one resident interviewed by *Sputnik Abkhazia*, "[a]fter the war, the city died down. The usual urban sounds disappeared, Sukhum's bright appearance vanished..." (quoted in Voitsekhovskii 2017, n.p.).

Sukhumi's post-war population brought to the fore not only cleavages between natives of the city and rural newcomers, as well as generational differences, but also the different degrees to which war had changed people. As a consequence, many of Sukhumi's long-term residents felt a sense of "displacement", even though they – unlike the former Georgian inhabitants – had not changed their location.

Among many of the old residents of Sukhumi whom I encountered, war-related emigration and forced displacement had triggered what Vera Skvirskaja (2010) has called "diasporic sensitivities". Writing about Odessa, Skvirskaja describes how residents have been deeply affected by the large-scale emigration of the city's native – especially Jewish – population. As she (2010, 82) observed, "[f]or those Odesans left behind, the image of the 'vanished' Odesa of yore is closely intertwined with feelings of loss of personal relations. People's accounts of their personal and family lives are pepped with references to their acquaintances, schoolmates, friends, and close family members living abroad." Similarly, many ethnic Abkhazians lost their former neighbours and friends, including not only ethnic kin, but a diverse mix of nationalities that was characteristic of pre-war Sukhumi. In some cases, feelings of estrangement could trigger a particular nostalgia or longing for the old city and its inhabitants. The following quotation from the already mentioned article in *Sputnik Abkhazia* captures this sense of loss:

> I miss my father and those guys, who left during and after the war, my childhood friends. There was my friend Marika […] – she now lives in Israel, Kristina […] – she now lives in Moscow … I had a lot of friends from different nationalities: Russians, Greeks, Jews, Georgians, Abkhaz, of course… I remember, we went to the sea to catch crabs, and one gigantic crab lodged onto my finger with its claws. The pain was hellish! My friend Dato […] (he now lives in Georgia) saved me, separating the crab claw into two pieces." (Voitsekhovskii 2017, n.p.)

In contrast to Odessa, in the case of Abkhazia's violent conflict social relations were not merely *physically* disrupted, but also ideologically. Given that among those former neighbours and friends were also Georgians who now belonged to the category of state enemy, regardless of their individual responsibility, people could not easily keep in touch, not only because it was practically difficult but also politically undesirable. One of my neighbours, for example, told me that she still sometimes misses her Georgian school "girlfriends", whom she had not seen since they fled. When I asked her whether they were still in touch, she nodded: "Yes, we write each other. They keep asking me to visit them, but I can't. It's the enemy after all! I am not going to ruin my reputation. It's not worth it."

Similar to what anthropologist Navaro-Yashin (2012, 173–74) observed among Turkish Cypriots, who had become separated from the Greek Cypriots through war, at times there seemed to be an "unrecognized sadness arising out of

the inability to name what has been lost because the 'who' who has been lost (people from the community of the so-called enemy, external or internal) cannot be officially known, named, recognized, or grieved." Drawing on the works of Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler, Navaro-Yashin (2012, 173) suggests that this "feeling of loss, not cognitively registered, can [...] generate melancholia, a psychical-subjective state in which the object of loss is largely unconscious to the identity of the mourner and in which, therefore, the loss is irredeemable, ambivalent, and lingering." During my fieldwork this melancholia usually manifested itself in relation to ruins or decaying buildings that gave a taste of the city or region's heyday. People who struggled to share suppressed memories in their homes often began to open up once we wandered the streets of Sukhumi.

Publicly, this melancholia manifested itself in nostalgia for "old Sukhum". At the time of my fieldwork, there were a striking number of publications engaging with the city's architectural heritage and people's personal memories of life in the city before the war. In 2016, Anzor Agumaa's book *Staryi Sukhum* was published, which featured images and detailed descriptions of Sukhumi's most renowned buildings. The book was a huge success and sold out immediately after its publication. It also inspired guided walking tours for children of the so-called "rural newcomers", organised by the head of the Sukhumi chess club. On Facebook and other social networks, people eagerly shared images of Soviet Abkhazia, remembering how beautiful Abkhazia once was and expressing the hope that it would once again be like that.

To some extent, this wave of nostalgia for "old Sukhum" opened up a discursive space to express feelings of loss that otherwise remained unrecognised. In an environment where everything Georgian was rejected, it provided a non-political space for locals to reflect on what they missed about the city's multi-ethnic past without appearing to be critical of the present. But by longing for a time when *nationality did not matter*, they also distanced themselves from the Georgian nationalist discourse. For ethnic Abkhazians, foregrounding Sukhumi's cosmopolitan past was also an act of re-appropriating the city and its history, of stressing that it was not and is *not* a Georgian city. The nostalgia for "old Sukhum" was not a nostalgia for "old Sukhum*i*" (with the Georgian "i" at the end). Hence, it opened a space that was ambivalent, where one was allowed to remember one's former Georgian neighbours, friends etc. without recognising their contribution to

the history of the city. They were remembered not so much as "Georgians" but as specific individuals who constituted a part of Sukhumi's pre-war "local internationalism".

While one aspect of nostalgia seemed to be about a longing for a time when ethnicity did not matter, my interlocutors also expressed a longing for *diversity*. A common complaint was that Abkhazia, and Sukhumi in particular, was not "colourful" enough. Moreover, many of my contacts distinguished life before and after the war in terms of the size of the population and the number of visitors, stressing that before the war, "you could hardly put one foot in front of the other for the crowds". This was even more the case in Sukhumi, where large cruise ships arrived on a daily basis. After the war, the city "shrank" in terms of population density and the movement of people became concentrated around a few spots, including the shopping street *Prospekt Mira*, the central *rynok* (market) – probably the most crowded part of Sukhumi – and, most importantly, the seafront promenade (*naberezhnaia*), with the busiest part extending from the popular "Penguin café" at the main port to the legendary *Brekhalovka*, an open-air coffee place, both of which date back to Soviet times.

Although depopulation created a sense of emptiness, fewer people also meant fewer opportunities for anonymity. One afternoon, I was meeting one of my Armenian contacts – a woman in her early 40s – at Sukhumi's popular "Narta" restaurant. Nare chose a table in the back, where she could smoke without being too visible. Putting on her sunglasses, she explained: "Almost all women smoke here, but they just do it in a way so they are not seen by their husbands or others." However, being married to a Russian man meant that she had more freedom – "he allows it", as she put it. Nare grew up in a village in western Abkhazia and was well acquainted with local traditions. When the fighting started in August 1992, her parents sent Nare to Adler on the Russian side of the border to finish school. She then attended university in Yerevan but returned to Abkhazia upon graduating and decided to stay, even though – in her own words – she was quite "sick and tired of it".

She explained: "I was considering to marry an Armenian man, but the problem is that they pretend to be open-minded and easy-going when you first meet them, but once you are married they are very jealous and you are not even allowed to look left or right. I like freedom too much." Now she was married to a Russian man with whom she had a little daughter, but still seemed discontent. Because the Abkhaz

are so conservative, life has become too serious, Nare finds: "Everyone constantly worries about what the neighbours are thinking." There is not even a single nightclub in Abkhazia, she cynically remarks: "When I studied in Yerevan, it was normal to go out dancing with my friends. There was nothing bad about it. But here, when I say something to my neighbours, they immediately ask if I want to ruin my child. […] This is why I prefer to talk to Russians, Armenians, or Georgians." According to Nare, the Georgians who lived in Abkhazia were not as traditional: "There was a good atmosphere. […] Even those who fought in the war now miss living with the Georgians. When the war was over they realised: '*Who are we going to live with now?*'"

War and displacement led to a significant decrease in Abkhazia's population and the majority of those who remained were ethnic Abkhazians, who were connected through extended family networks. Many of my contacts stressed that it was almost impossible to go anywhere without being recognised by a relative (however distant), which occasionally instilled in them a desire to escape – and not only among Armenians like Nare. For example, when I saw my friend Khibla a few weeks after our first meeting, she seemed tired and irritable. She told me she was exhausted, did not want to see anyone and needed a break. The desire to "get out" and "see something else" was also voiced by many of my other contacts, both younger and older. People frequently told me they find it difficult to "relax". There was little variety in people's activities and even less so in their opportunities to escape the eyes and the strict moral standards of their community. As one of my male contacts mentioned, living in Abkhazia is like living in a cage: "We see and do the same things all the time. It's morally exhausting. We need to leave the country if we want to relax; there is no corner where you don't have any relatives." In his view, things were different in Soviet times: "I don't think ethnic Abkhazians were necessarily less conservative, but because of all the tourists coming from different places there were more possibilities to escape and have some fun."

At the time of my fieldwork, tourists were still the main source of "entertainment" for local men. When it was tourist season, beach bars would begin popping up along Abkhazia's beaches, locals would rent out any spare rooms they had and excursions in little mini busses were advertised across Abkhazia. For local men, this provided an excellent opportunity to flirt with female tourists or even engage in more serious sexual relationships. There was a stark distinction between

female tourists – mostly from Russia – and "our girls", referring to ethnic Abkhazians or women raised in Abkhazia more generally. Russian women were there to have "fun" with, whereas "our girls" were for serious courtship and marriage. At the same time, the two activities were not mutually exclusive; in fact, it was quite common (and even somewhat accepted) for married men to have affairs with tourists. According to my male interlocutors, Russian women were sexually liberated and therefore desired objects of casual sexual encounters. Unlike Abkhaz women, they were not restricted by rigid cultural codes and a high degree of social control. To some extent, this made them seem culturally inferior in the eyes of the Abkhaz (since they were acting in ways that would be considered shameful according to Abkhaz customs), but at the same time allowed them to fulfil certain "needs" and "desires" of Abkhaz men that were impossible to meet for Abkhaz women, even in marriage.

In contrast to men, women could not so easily "distract" themselves by flirting with non-Abkhaz men. Nevertheless, the Abkhaz women I was in regular contact with did express certain reservations vis-à-vis their male counterparts, suggesting that even though one was expected to marry a co-ethnic, there were certain advantages to choosing a man from a different ethnic background. Like my Armenian friend suggested, Abkhaz men had a reputation for not being very generous and expecting their wives to continuously engage in strenuous housework. There was a sense that being married to an Abkhaz man involved hard physical work but minimal appreciation. It was therefore not surprising that there was much talk about how men of different nationalities treated women. Khibla, for example, told me with excitement that when she went to a restaurant in Tbilisi, the Georgian men were toasting the women. "An Abkhaz man would never do that, can you imagine? They do not appreciate women in the same way as Georgian men do", she explained.

What this demonstrates is that while post-war Abkhazia, including Sukhum, was hardly cosmopolitan anymore, a longing for an "ethnic other" nevertheless remained. To use Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja's (2012, 6) term, "Sukhum" became a "post-cosmopolitan city", that is a place where, despite ethnic tensions, "earlier links and boundaries are not forgotten" and cosmopolitanism transforms "into nostalgia for a city that is no more".

6.5.   "People are hungry": fears of betrayal and intra-ethnic mistrust

As has become clear by now, the nostalgia for the past and the desire to escape described in the previous section was significantly shaped not only by a growing cultural conservatism and the lack of anonymity, but also certain changes in intra-group dynamics. As mentioned earlier, my interlocutors often noted that they were tired of each other not only because they always saw the same people, but also because of certain kinds of behaviours that were experienced as stressful. For example, when my friend Khibla invited me to come to the village with her for the weekend, she explained how nice it was to take a break from the city, that she was tired of the people around her, referring to the already mentioned "change in values". According to Khibla, there are so many people in Abkhazia who want to be friends with you or call themselves "your friend" just to take advantage of you, which is why she tries to keep people like that at distance; "One has to be very careful", she stressed. During my fieldwork, I encountered a strong sense that it had become difficult to trust *anyone*, even within one's own ethnic community. Relations among people – even if they were of the same ethnicity – were constantly fraught with conflict and betrayal was frequently experienced at the hands of "one's own".

Mutual help has a long tradition in Abkhazia (see chapter 2) and I was constantly told stories about how, during and immediately after the war, people helped each other. Even during my fieldwork, I was often amazed by how kind and helpful people were and how responsible they felt for their neighbours or fellow villagers. However, what was equally striking was the pervasiveness of inter-personal conflict. Most of the disputes that I observed evolved around money (or its absence), which had assumed a central role in post-war Abkhazia. Many people were constantly in debt, unable to pay back what they had borrowed and always looking for opportunities to either make money or to avoid returning it. Although life in Abkhazia was cheap in some respects, money was central to rituals and people regularly had to spend large sums for festivities and rituals, such as weddings and funerals, where each guest was expected to contribute financially. As Frances Pine (2002, 86) noted decades earlier in the context of the Polish highlands, "[t]hese payments can be seen as presents, and as the community feeding into the individual

house and nourishing its growth, fertility and membership". But, much like in Pine's field site, there was also an expectation of reciprocity, for "although people claimed not to account such sums, they usually gave similar amounts to those which had been given them at their own weddings and christenings, or they gave in the expectation that they would receive in return when they had children or when their daughters married" (2002, 86).

Despite the ideal of reciprocity, my interlocutors regularly complained that they had to spend so much money on festivities and rituals that there was little left to themselves. In a virtually non-existent economy, as they would put it, it was hard to find permanent employment and those who were employed seldom received more than 10,000 roubles (around 100 GBP) a month. Most of my contacts were engaged in some form of petty trade. Employment was most secure in the public sector, but salaries were usually low and not always paid on time. For instance, when I stayed with a family where the wife worked as a teacher, there were times when she, who was the main breadwinner, was waiting for weeks to receive her salary. Most people were able to rely on subsistence agriculture and there was usually no shortage of basic food. But expenses were nevertheless piling up: Gifts had to be bought for teachers to assure one's child's educational success, money had to be contributed to a neighbour's funeral – and funerals were frequent. Consequently, they not only brought back memories of the war – as many deaths were in one way or another associated with the war – but also reinforced financial worries and frustration about one's obligations to often distant others. In addition, many had high medical bills to pay. As my contacts liked to stress, there was hardly a single person in post-war Abkhazia who did not suffer from some illness and did not require regular medical care.

Unlike in other post-Soviet regions, state structures in Abkhazia had not only been weakened by the breakdown of socialism but also by war and international non-recognition and isolation. The lack of state support and access to financial services meant that people had to rely heavily on personal networks. As they were under pressure to make money but struggled to find conventional ways to do so, there seemed to be a growing readiness to manipulate social bonds for one's own economic gain. As a consequence, non-Abkhaz contacts often advised me to rent accommodation only from non-Abkhaz owners, as ethnic Abkhazians allegedly could not be trusted in financial matters. Once a landlady tried to charge me almost double

the rent we initially agreed on; another time a driver I had paid some money to in advance disappeared without a word. When a friend managed to track him down, he denied any responsibility and claimed that I had given him the money as a gift. When I argued that this had not been the case, he resorted to denunciation – a common strategy – and threatened to "expose" me as a spy for the Georgian government.[100] It was then that I truly understood why people kept sensitive information to a very small, trusted circle around them – because in the wrong circumstances, anything anyone said could be used against them by (almost) *anyone*, regardless of their ethnicity. Information was thus another currency, especially for those who lacked money, who often skilfully used it to disempower the materially advantaged.

What this situation demonstrated was that in post-war Abkhazia, trust was something that could not be easily afforded. As a Western foreigner who lacked the kind of in-depth cultural intimacy that natives had, I was of course a popular target.[101] However, as an Abkhaz neighbour reassured me: "Don't think it's only because you are a foreigner. *They do this to us too.*" Another long-term contact remarked towards the end of my fieldwork: "When I first saw you I was thinking: What is this girl doing here, in our cruel corner of the world? They will devour her (*szhirat'*) immediately. Poor girl, I thought." But after a moment of silence, he continued:

> With you as a foreigner it is one thing, but even we, who are all connected with each other through shared acquaintances or friends live in constant fear of betrayal. *People have changed significantly* [...] From our brigade there are perhaps only two people left who you can trust, who you can tell a secret. And still, if you go there and tell them, you still worry if they might betray you. And they worry too, not just you. Everyone worries. [...] We live like animals (*zveri*) in the woods. You have no idea how that affects the psyche. If you live here and don't go crazy, that's quite something.

When I inquired why he thinks that people constantly betray each other, he came up with the following explanation: "Envy (*zavist'*) – do you know that word? People are greedy (*zhadnye*); when they see that you have something or do

---

[100] In Soviet times, denunciation was a common social practice among Soviet citizens, who were encouraged to identify so-called "alien elements" (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2005, chap. 11). Although it was particularly common in the Stalinist era, it persisted throughout the Soviet period (see Utekhin 2018). Accusing foreigners of being spies was particularly widespread (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2015, 85).

[101] When I sometimes asked my contacts how they knew whom they could trust, they usually found it very difficult to explain. "We just know", was a typical reply.

something that they don't, even if it doesn't concern them at all and they stand in no relationship to you, they try everything to stop it from happening. People do anything to *survive*. People here are not satisfied (*sytye*)." Even after the military victory in 1993, life continued to be a struggle for survival. For much of Abkhazia's post-war period, people lived in poverty and although they no longer feared as much for their physical safety, they experienced a daily struggle that many described as "surviving" (*vizhit'*), not "living" (*zhit'*), thus referring to the struggle to meet elementary subsistence needs.[102] Against the background of a ruined economy, this nourished what George Foster (1965) – based on his research among peasants in a Mexican village – called the "Image of the Limited Good", whereby all desired things in life were imagined to exist only in finite quantities, meaning that "an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others" (1965, 297), thus leading to widespread envy.

People often told me that after the Abkhaz victory, they imagined that Abkhazia would soon turn into a prosperous "Switzerland" of the Black Sea. While these dreams never materialised and the majority continued to struggle to make ends meet, there were also people who were doing better than others. The situation strongly resembled what Michael Bürge (2018, 113) observed in his study of relations of mis/trust in Sierra Leone, where

> [m]ost people [...] could not consolidate a place for themselves in the "good life" that they had expected. Yet, this "good life" was still taking place somewhere else; very close to them they could see that others "enjoyed" themselves, while they still suffered and could not generate any capital. Instead, things increasingly took a turn for the worse. The social relationships and economic practices upon which people had relied and pinned their hopes did not deliver as expected. Feelings of exclusion were even stronger. [...] People wanted to bridge the gap between themselves and what they wanted to achieve, the position in which life was more "comfortable" and "enjoyable".

Those who did not have any money often seemed to see themselves not as full members of society and felt stigmatised. Despite the economic hardship that most people faced, one's social standing was heavily monetised. The situation could be particularly difficult for young men. In order to court a potential partner, they had

---

[102] Even at the time of my fieldwork, many people still referred to their existence as "surviving" rather than "living". As Steph Jansen (2015, 161) noted in the context of Bosnia, "surviving" was a reference to the "continuous struggles to secure what were considered 'normal lives'."

to be able to take her out in a car that was ideally their own (and sufficiently modern) and pay for all expenses. For example, the head of one of the families that I regularly visited in the village told me that he was hoping that his nephew, who was in his early 30s and living alone with his widowed father, would finally get married. However, it was an extremely difficult time economically, and he also recognised that since he did not currently have any income, finding a partner was not realistic. Although his nephew was a "good", hardworking young man from a respected family, this was regarded to be insufficient.

Many people, regardless of their age, seemed to be in constant debt, which led to a vicious cycle where it became less realistic to return borrowed money and lenders were becoming more impatient to get their loans back. This produced a growing sense of powerlessness and in turn provided an incentive to find even more "creative" ways to make money. This was strengthened by an underlying resentment towards more successful members of society, whose wealth was often seen as the outcome of the deeply unfair post-war distributive order. As mentioned earlier, state support was mainly targeted at war veterans, leaving younger people in particular to their own devices. Especially those without family support felt that no one cared about them. But if no one cares about *them*, why should *they* care about anyone else?

Mistrust – or more specifically, the fear of betrayal – was therefore not only a permanent feature of inter-ethnic relations but also of relations between co-ethnics. Hence, in order to detect whether somebody could be trusted, one not only had to determine their ethnicity, but also whether he or she was a "good", honest person. People's trust rarely reached beyond their immediate family members and certain others they grew up with who had a status similar to that of blood relatives. Outsiders, regardless of their ethnicity, first had to prove their moral qualities. Similar to what Kolind (2008, 135) observed during his research on post-war identification in Bosnia, where others were often evaluated according to their "decency", to behave well (or decently) is "to be able to provide for oneself and one's family, to be honest and hard-working, to be self-sacrificing, to be considerate toward other people and to pay visits to them, and also to remain the same no matter what pressures or temptations one is exposed to."

Assessing a person's decency was, of course, easier among one's co-ethnics, where some networks of trust already existed through which more or less reliable

information could be obtained. Mistrust was therefore not necessarily a result of the absence of trust. In fact, people often told me how much they had helped others to get back on their feet after the war. But it was precisely the extent to which people became dependent on each other that generated friction and resulted in frequent disappointments. For example, when I rented a small flat from an Abkhaz woman (and "war hero"), I was assured by one of my close contacts that she was a "good", trustworthy woman. However, when, a month later, she asked for almost double the rent that we had agreed on, this was not only stressful for me, but also for my friend, who realised that this woman was not as honourable as she thought she was, and thus felt disappointed.

Focusing solely on inter-group relations (e.g. Clogg 2008; Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010; Mühlfried 2019, chap. 5), existing studies have failed to capture the extent to which Abkhazia as a whole is a "community of mistrust", where mistrust is an inherent feature of *any* social interaction, whether between members of an ethnic group or across them. Although cultural intimacy without doubt existed among co-ethnics, being among "one's own" was not necessarily the safe space that one would expect. In fact, knowing of and navigating the risks of intra-ethnic betrayal was precisely what became part of post-war cultural intimacy. Living in such an environment, as my interlocutors often stressed, was "morally exhausting". People experienced betrayal and disappointments on a regular basis, often even by people who they thought were close to them. Thus, "plasticity" or "being plastic" was no longer a behaviour exclusively associated with the Mingrelians. However, what distinguished the mistrust towards non-Abkhaz from mistrust towards ethnic Abkhazians was once again that the prevalence of disrespectable behaviour by "one's own" was blamed on the difficult and unfortunate circumstances in which they lived: "*Ne liudi takie – zhizn' takaia*" ("It's not people who are like that – life is like that"), as my contacts liked to say.

6.6. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to understand the ways in which the expulsion and absence of the Georgian population manifested itself in the lives of the ethnic Abkhazian population that remained. As I argued in the previous chapter, the hegemonic discourse was that the Georgians were the ones to blame not only for the

violence committed against Abkhaz, but also for their own expulsion, and thus the violence committed against themselves. Consequently, responsibility for any of the negative events that happened was collectively displaced to the local Georgian population.

While the research for this chapter did not reveal any doubts about the rightfulness of displacement as such, it nevertheless detected significant unease around the appropriation of Georgian property – the so-called "trophy houses" – which was perceived as a violation of the Abkhaz moral code. To many, the trophy houses were a curse, both literally – as spaces haunted by former occupants – and metaphorically, as a source and reminder of a certain "moral corruption" within Abkhazian society. Disassociating themselves from the trophy house allowed my interlocutors to maintain or restore a sense of moral integrity. However, this process was not necessarily grounded in empathy for the "enemy". As illustrated in this chapter, even though the displacement caused much distress, this distress appeared largely self-focused, with my interlocutors being primarily concerned with the moral development of their own group rather than the plight of the other.[103]

In the post-war period, emotions and attitudes vis-à-vis the displaced were to some extent mediated and re-negotiated through evolving intra-ethnic relations and issues of socio-economic inequality. Once the immediate conflict was ended and the Georgians were largely out of sight, actors on the ground became pre-occupied with their own socio-economic positions within a new, emerging order that was perceived as highly arbitrary. Consequently, displacement could not simply "solve" the problem of peaceful co-habitation once and for all by removing the adverse population. While the question of who owns the Abkhazian territory as a whole united those fighting the Georgian enemy, the question of who should own the property *within* that territory turned out to be decisively divisive.

The existence of different narratives and discourses thus reflects the multiple experiences and degrees of victimisation, loss and suffering that people in Abkhazia experienced during and after the war, and the cycle of belief and doubt that they found themselves in as a consequence; for despite their efforts to integrate the counter-discourse into the larger narrative of victimhood, tensions were never fully resolved. And yet, rather than merely reflecting these tensions, the counter-

---

[103] This resonates with research in social psychology that stresses the self-focused nature of collective guilt. For instance, according to Branscombe and Miron (2004, 329), collective guilt "reflects a selfish concern for one's own pain rather than a sympathetic concern for the disadvantaged others."

discourse also provided people with a resource to cope with them. Not only did it lay the foundation for engagement across the conflict divide, but also allowed actors to counter intra-group marginalisation. Finally, the counter-discourse also invoked a shared experience of hardship and alienation absent from official representations. While causing embarrassment and despair, the laments around the trophy houses had also become part of an intimate national repertoire and thus constitutive of Abkhazia's post-war community. What this shows is that collective identities are not only constituted by tales of war-time heroism and sacrifice but also by stories that were considered embarrassing.

As I explored, in addition to that about the trophy house, there was another recurring lament, which focused on the rural newcomers and how they changed the social and cultural fabric of the city. The division between "urban natives" and "rural newcomers" overlapped with that of "old" and "new Abkhaz" in that the "new Abkhaz", much like the "new Russians", were often stereotypically seen as uneducated villagers who came to the cities to occupy houses. However, while the lament about the trophy houses was grounded in shame and resentment, complaints about the rural newcomers expressed feelings of estrangement, thus producing a sense of loss and longing for one's former neighbours and friends who were forced to leave because they were swept up in the process of antagonistic collective categorisation, as well as a more general nostalgia for "old Sukhum" that was also publicly expressed. It shows how nostalgia was not only an expression of melancholia over the loss of "ethnic others" that were once part of a cosmopolitan self but also – once again – a product of the changing dynamics of inter-personal relations among co-ethnics and the downside of ethnic homogeneity. In the aftermath of the war and in the context of international isolation, being among co-ethnics also engendered a claustrophobic atmosphere and a desire for diversity that drove certain people to seek out "ethnic others".

The chapter also examined the fatigue and frustration that ordinary people liked to express about "their own people". It specifically looked at the phenomenon of intra-ethnic mistrust and the fear of betrayal that still characterises intra-ethnic relations today. In contrast to the widespread assumption that shared ethnicity equals trust, this section argues that in Abkhazia, it was not only inter-ethnic relations that were characterised by ambivalence and mistrust in the post-war period, but also intra-ethnic relations. While this attests to an increasing post-war

fragmentation of the ethnic Abkhaz community, I suggested that knowing of and navigating the risks of intra-ethnic betrayal was also constitutive of a specific kind of post-war Abkhaz cultural intimacy. Knowing whom to mis/trust was as much a marker of belonging as it was to become a victim of betrayal (for if people always knew whom to trust and would never misjudge others, there would be no issue of mistrust). Like the laments around the "trophy houses", the narratives of estrangement and disappointment presented in the last two sections both reflect internal fragmentation while also expressing a shared experience of coming to terms with a new social reality.

Chapter 7. Encountering the "Enemy": Hospitals and Hospitality

The previous chapter looked at the ways in which the absence of the Georgian population has been felt in Abkhazia in the context of protracted conflict. It therefore interrogated the moments of doubt and uncertainty that have been implicated in the process of redefining the boundaries of self and other outlined in chapter 5, focussing on the general sense of unease and the local discourses and affective states in which it manifested itself that emerged in the post-war period and that still circulated at the time of my fieldwork.

Whereas the previous chapter was concerned with absences, this chapter shifts the focus once again to "presences" in the form of renewed encounters, albeit (mostly) outside of Abkhazia. For even though the conflict has become increasingly intractable with little progress on the issue of the return of the displaced, recent years have witnessed a higher number of ethnic Abkhazians crossing the conflict divide in order to travel "to Georgia". How can we make sense of this seeming contradiction? What causes people to transcend borders and what relationships does it produce? And what does this tell us about the relationship between so-called "enemies" as well as the relationship that Abkhazians have to their state?

In the first section, I investigate how certain shortcomings of the *de facto* state can motivate people to cross the conflict divide. In particular, I address the significance of the provision of free healthcare for Abkhaz citizens offered by the Georgian government, which has served as an important incentive for cross-border movement. However, as I will argue in section 2, while the growing numbers of those crossing the conflict line attest to significant shortcomings of Abkhazian *statecraft*, it does not seem to cast into doubt Abkhazia's *statehood* as such. In fact, the growing number of border crossings is also a sign of the increasing normalisation – or "banality" – of the Abkhazian *de facto* state, which has empowered some people to encounter the adversary. The readiness to encounter the enemy can thus be seen as a direct outcome of the state- and nation-building process that has provided Abkhazians with ontological security facilitating cross-border contact.

In section four, I focus on the experience of encountering the enemy. I suggest that it is the awareness of going to Georgia as a "foreigner" that facilitates cross-border movement as well as the rules of hospitality and an underlying ethos of civility that help to structure encounters among official "enemies" once the border is

crossed. Drawing on the experience of my key interlocutor Timur, whom I accompanied on his travels, I elaborate how Timur relentlessly seeks to restrain his hostile emotions and to behave in ways that are in accordance with an ideal of civility. What we can observe here is the conscious attempt to regulate emotions generated by memories of violence and how giving in to these emotions is seen as "uncivil". In the final section, I suggest that even though the cross-border movement does not seem to indicate a desire towards re-integration into the Georgian state, there is nevertheless a certain desire or willingness to re-connect and re-establish "normal" relations – i.e. relations outside of an ethno-nationalist context.

7.1.   Why go "there"? Material and physical well-being, family, and pleasure

At the end of 2017, when I was conducting fieldwork in Tbilisi, I was told about a young couple from Sukhumi who fled Abkhazia "in search of a better life". When I went to the charity organisation where they were temporarily accommodated, I was surprised to see that they were not even in their twenties and that the girl was heavily pregnant. The contact who had arranged the meeting told me that the woman had some mental issues and that the two were fighting constantly. The charity workers seemed overwhelmed by their presence and not quite sure what to do with them. My contact – a displaced person himself – lamented: "There are still all those Georgian refugees in need of support, how can they think that they can come here and will be taken care of by the Georgian state?"

When I asked the couple why they had left, the young man answered that there was nothing for him to do in Abkhazia. He had no work and no relatives able to support him and his pregnant girlfriend. When he heard rumours that the Georgian state generously supports ethnic Abkhazians willing to move by providing them with accommodation and work, they decided to take the risk. At this point, they had nothing to lose; they were part of Abkhazia's previously mentioned "lost generation" (JAMnews 2016b): Young people who grew up in the midst or after the war and who lack both formal education and vocational skills as well as traditional family support. This was a generation that became disillusioned with the state that their parents had been fighting for – often sacrificing their lives – and that they felt did nothing to support them.

The two were certainly an extreme example. And yet, during my time in Abkhazia, I did encounter a number of Abkhazians who considered, or "threatened", to go to Georgia. For example, only a month earlier, I had a conversation with my contact Vlad, an Abkhaz man in his mid-30s. Reflecting on the socio-economic situation in Abkhazia, in particular in the east, he became agitated, announcing that "if things won't improve in Abkhazia over the next few years, I will move to Georgia!". Vlad had been to Georgia a couple of times to visit his sister, who had married a Georgian and was now living near Tbilisi. He told me that when he first crossed the border, he was so scared that his legs were shaking: "The whole memory of the war came up again. I was terrified." However, the second time he went, he was already feeling more at ease, and the third time he was so confident that he was, as he put it, "going out to restaurants and cafés like a king".

Listening to his grievances, I was uncertain whether Vlad would actually be willing to move to Georgia. Rather, he seemed to voice his anger at the Abkhazian state, using the possibility of "changing sides" as a threat against his government, which he felt was letting him down. He was only eleven years old when the war broke out. After 9th grade (at the age of 14), he left school and started working. At that time no one really cared about studying and there were no role models to follow, he explained. It was the period after the war when everyone was just trying to get by and there were constant shootings, kidnapping and killings. Vlad himself got seriously injured in an attack by Georgian partisans and was now officially considered a war veteran and awarded a small pension. He lived in the village with his wife and small children and although he was able to get by, he was also deeply frustrated. As he once complained, "people don't have anything and the government does not do anything to change that. There is no civilisation, there are no factories or anything like that. They put everything in their own pockets."

While some considered or opted to go to Georgia to improve their economic situation, many more did so to improve their physical health. Seeking medical treatment has without a doubt been the biggest incentive for Abkhazians to encounter their official "enemy". In 2010, the Georgian government launched a programme offering free medical care to citizens of Abkhazia of ethnic Abkhaz origin as part of a more "people-oriented policy" to conflict resolution outlined in the "State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement Through Cooperation" (De Waal 2018, 28). There are several reasons why Abkhazians would take up this offer: First,

patients need to pay for healthcare in Abkhazia and second, treatments either lack quality or are not available within Abkhazia at all. Those who hold Russian citizenship can also enjoy free medical care in Russia; however, as one of my contacts with a background in medicine told me, the best medical care is usually provided in the main cities – Moscow and Saint Petersburg – which are far away and therefore expensive to reach. As he explained: "If we talk about Moscow or St Petersburg, then medical care is better in Russia. But if you compare Georgia to provincial cities in Russia, then the medical system is more advanced in Georgia."

My contact, Yura, told me that when his mother was diagnosed with cancer, she first started treatment in Sukhumi's main hospital, but was soon told that they would not be able to save her. He then moved her to a hospital in the nearby Russian city of Sochi, but, after some time, was again told that they were unable to help. When one of the doctors suggested to move her to a hospital in Georgia as a last resort, he went back to Abkhazia and applied for the official permission that is required for Abkhazian citizens to cross the border with Georgia. Yura remembered his visit to the State Security Service with discomfort: "It was not easy. They asked me, 'Why would you go to our aggressor?' I said, 'My mother is dying and she is the only person I have left.' Eventually, they gave me the permission and I took her to a hospital in Tbilisi."

Another example was my long-term interlocutor Timur. Like many others of his generation, Timur had just finished high school when the war broke out, putting an end to his dreams of studying Abkhaz history or literature. And yet, even though his life took a very different path from the one that he and his family had imagined, he retained his curiosity. When we met, he was immediately drawn to the idea of travelling to Europe – something that he had always wanted, he explained. This was at a time when the EU had just granted visa-free travel to citizens of Georgia and, although the Abkhazian government was quick to declare that this would not serve as a carrot to lure Abkhazians into getting Georgian citizenship, the option was nevertheless on the table and Timur was considering applying for a Georgian passport – not because he wanted to go to Georgia but in order to be able to travel to the EU. After the war he had sworn to himself that he would never cross what he referred to as the "devil's border". However, as more and more people he knew were going – including the so-called "heroes of Abkhazia" – he started to reconsider his principles. On the one hand, he was keen to pursue his dream of travelling, while on

the other, he was deeply committed to his "people" (*narod*) and state. Many of his friends had died either during or after the war, and obtaining a Georgian passport felt like a betrayal of them and the cause they had died for.

Eventually, Timur started to look into treatment options as a way to justify his journey both to himself and others. Since childhood, he suffered from a serious disease but was only able to receive limited treatment after the war. Gradually, he began to realise that going to Georgia could be a chance not only to pursue his dream of travelling but also to improve his health and life more generally. Despite his devotion to his "homeland" and "people", he was also frustrated with the lack of medical services in Abkhazia itself: "They [the Georgians] make sure that we stay alive, whereas ours don't care", pointing to the irony that people were better treated by the enemy than "their own". Consequently, it was his frustration with the Abkhazian state and its failure to live up to its most basic promise – to safeguard its citizens – which allowed him to consider going to Georgia. While Timur, like many others in Abkhazia, was willing to make tremendous sacrifices for the "state", he also expected to receive *something* in return.

Thus, while for some "going to Georgia" was a matter of life and death (as in the case of Yura), for others (such as Timur) different motives converged. This also applied to my friend Khibla, who used medical reasons to justify her trips to Georgia and increase her chances of getting a permit (*propusk*). As I mentioned in chapter 5, Khibla was from a so-called "mixed family", meaning that many of her mother's relatives had ended up on the other side of the Inguri river. Hence, to some extent, these trips were about connecting with the other, neglected part of her family. But visiting her relatives and seeking medical treatment also provided Khibla with the opportunity to fulfil her desire to "take a break" from her Abkhazian social circle that I discussed in the previous chapter. For ordinary Abkhazians, the closest opportunity to "relax" outside of Abkhazia was Sochi. Albeit officially an enemy state, Georgia constituted an alternative destination to "see something else". For Khibla, Georgia was attractive for several reasons: in terms of culture, it seemed different but still familiar. Khibla loved going to restaurants in Tbilisi, not only because of the food, which was widely valued even among Abkhazians, but also because of the respect that she enjoyed not only as a guest but also as a woman (as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Khibla complained that Abkhaz men did not treat women with enough respect). Moreover, with shop and street signs written in English and

Western tourists wandering the streets of Tbilisi, Georgia was also special because even though it was not necessarily perceived to be more modern than Sochi, it was certainly more "European" due to its geopolitical alignment with the West.

Contrary to what one might think, Khibla's case was not necessarily an exception. During my fieldwork, I often sensed a certain degree of detached curiosity about what life was like on the other side, a curiosity that seemed to be nourished by the growing number of people seeking medical treatment in Georgia who would then tell their neighbours and friends about their experience, thus leading to a certain degree of normalisation of cross-border movement. Sometimes I even had the impression that, despite the sensitivity of the topic, going to Georgia was somewhat "in fashion". As more people went and shared their experiences, others – not wanting to miss out – were curious too. Many in Abkhazia had heard about the partly successful attempts at modernisation under Georgian President Saakashvili and were curious to see the effects.[104] Although at times motivated by a desire to validate their preconceptions and see that things on "the other side" were not as good as propagated, this curiosity seemed to a large extent genuine.

At the end of the day, people were "hungry" for new experiences. Many of my interlocutors seemed particularly intrigued by Batumi, Georgia's major spa town on the black sea coast, which underwent large-scale redevelopment after the 2003 Rose Revolution. One of my contacts from the Abkhaz diaspora in Moscow told me that he even knew of cases where ethnic Abkhazians living in Russia would travel to Batumi as tourists and "really enjoyed it". However, those willing to travel nevertheless had to be careful. While going to Georgia became somewhat fashionable, it had to be organised and framed in the right way. Simply going for "fun" could have severe consequences. This is well illustrated by an incident in August 2015, when a group of Abkhaz travelled to Tbilisi to watch the 2015 UEFA Super Cup between Sevilla and Barcelona. When the trip became public, a wave of condemnation followed, not least because it took place only a few days before the "Memorial Day of Defenders of the Fatherland" devoted to the victims of the war. The "Republican Organisation of Veterans of the Patriotic War of the people of Abkhazia" (ARUAA) immediately released a statement, saying that "[t]hese people, crossing the border without permission, not only violated the laws of the Republic of Abkhazia, but also insulted

---

[104] Although Saakashvili was often described to me as "crazy" because of his role in the 2008 war in South Ossetia, several of my interlocutors commented positively on Saakashvili as a "moderniser".

the memory of those who died for the freedom of Abkhazia" (Ekho Kavkaza 2015, n.p.). And even journalist Inal Khashig (quoted in Tsintsadze 2017, n.p.), a football fan himself, stated that "[i]t wasn't worth to disregard the enormous sacrifices, which our nation suffered, in order to see Lionel Messi."

7.2. Statehood versus statecraft: the success and failure of the *de facto* state

So far, I have explored the different motives for why people cross the conflict divide. To what extent do they, by transgressing the boundary of the conflict, subvert Abkhazian *de facto* statehood? What the previous section attests to is a certain assertion of individual, everyday interests. War and unrecognised statehood have placed great demands on Abkhazia's population: During the war, ordinary people endured violence and death in addition to other kinds of hardship. War was then followed by non-recognition, which meant that they had to endure the long-term consequences of isolation and the economic and psychological hardship that came with it. These sacrifices were often made not merely for the sake of individual survival but for that of the nation at the cost of people's individual well-being and that of their families. During my fieldwork, I was often amazed by people's relentless optimism and devotion to the Abkhazian state-building project. My interlocutors frequently told me that, despite all the difficulties, they were certain that Abkhazia will flourish in a few decades. There was a fundamental belief that things will be fine *eventually*. However, this optimism usually followed earlier utterances of despair and was thus likely a strategy to manage (or tame) despair rather than an indication of its absence.

As some of the statements presented in the previous section show, much of the frustration and despair was directed at the government. Although there was much patience with a state that was regarded to be still in its "infancy", like in other post-socialist places there was also a widespread disillusionment with *politika*, which was seen as a "dirty business" in the hands of those who seek to enrich themselves at the cost of others (see also Kolind 2007, 125–29; Jansen 2015, chap. 6). There was a sense that because politicians were working for themselves or their families and not for the common good, there was no money left to provide the most basic social services to those in need. For example, my contact Timur once told me

the story of his friend Aslan, who, as he explained, "killed many Georgians during the war". A few years ago, he almost died and, as a last resort, was taken to a hospital in Georgia where the doctors saved his life. When he came back, he allegedly announced to his friends: "I was fighting against the wrong people! The people I killed saved my life; and the people I was fighting for didn't do anything. I should have fought against those."

When Timur told me this story, he was laughing at the irony that, of all people, it was the enemy who saved Aslan's life. But behind his laughter was a deeper criticism, or disappointment, pointing to the failure of the Abkhazian state to provide services and goods that are regarded to be essential for leading a dignified life. With all the emphasis on the collective survival of the Abkhaz "ethnos", little attention was given to *individual* survival and well-being. Consequently, although the "state" seemed pervasive symbolically, in the sense that it was what people had fought for and were devoted to preserving no matter what, in many ways it was not present *enough*. Both Aslan's original statement and Timur's anecdote based on it thus expressed a deep-seated disappointment with the Abkhazian state that they were so personally and collectively invested in.

And yet, although Aslan was no longer alive and could not be asked in this matter, the fact that he made this statement to his friends in Abkhazia also suggests that he had not actually shifted his loyalties. Furthermore, if Aslan truly meant what he said, Timur would have hardly turned it into a somewhat amusing anecdote, unless, of course, he tacitly agreed. But having known Timur for an extended period of time, he – a committed "patriot" – would hardly turn his back on "his people". Hence, while Timur's story about his friend Aslan stressed Abkhazia's failure in terms of state*craft* – that is "what the state does, claims to do, and should do" (Jansen 2015, 12), it did not (necessarily) challenge Abkhazia's state*hood*, i.e. *that Abkhazia is and should be a state.*[105] Rather than challenging the state, his criticism seemed to be grounded in a deep-seated care about "our state" (*nashe gosudarstvo*) and a desire for it to function better.

Thus, the growing critique of statecraft can be seen as a result of what Brubaker in reference to Max Weber called a process of "routinization". According to Brubaker (2002, 177), "[o]nce ratcheted up to a high level, groupness does not remain there out of inertia. If not sustained at high levels through specific social and

---

[105] Jansen (2015, 12) defines statehood as "what the state is, claims to be, and should be".

cognitive mechanisms, it will tend to decline, as everyday interests reassert themselves, through a process of what Weber (in a different but apposite context [1968 (1922): 246-254] called 'routinization' (*Veralltaeglichung*, literally 'towards everydayness').)" Despite their persistent sense of entrapment due to the unresolved nature of the conflict, and international non-recognition in particular, the people I knew in Abkhazia nevertheless experienced a certain sense of normality, allowing them to shift their attention to non-ethnic, mundane concerns.

This did not necessarily mean that the state came to matter *less*. That people diverted their attention can be seen as a consequence of the state drifting into the background of their lives – but, as such, it continued to be fundamental. To use Michael Billig's terminology, almost three decades after the war, the Abkhazian nation-state has become somewhat "banal"[106]: Having been transformed from a centre of attention into a powerful background, it has been internalised by its residents as a taken-for-granted framework of social and political action.[107] As Billig argued in his famous work *Banal Nationalism* (1995, 8),

> nationhood provides a continual background for their political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers. In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.

One might object that it is far-fetched to apply the concept of banal nationalism to a contested, largely unrecognised state. Billig (1995, 8) himself described it as the nationalism of the "established nations" which "have confidence in their own continuity, and [...] are part of what is conventionally described as 'the West'." He distinguishes between two kinds of symbols: routine symbols and signals of nationhood. Whereas routine symbols can be unconscious reminders, signals carry a specific message that intends to evoke emotions. For example, Irish tricolour flags and Union Jacks in Northern Ireland "are not mindless symbols, for each side is

---

[106] Banal does not mean benign: Although it is so deeply embedded in our everyday routines that it might go unnoticed, it reproduces the very institutions that allow forces and populations to be readily mobilised for war (Billig 1995, 7).

[107] As discussed in chapter 5, an exception are the residents of Abkhazia's Gali region, who are predominantly Georgian (for a detailed study, see Lundgren 2018).

consciously displaying its position and distancing itself from its neighbour. The tricolors, in this respect, differ from those hanging on public buildings south of the border" (Billig 1995, 41). Only when sovereignty is no longer contested can banal nationalism develop: "One might predict that, as a nation-state becomes established in its sovereignty, and if it faces little internal challenge, then the symbols of nationhood, which might once have been consciously displayed, do not disappear from sight, but instead become absorbed into the environment of the established homeland. There is, then, a movement from symbolic mindfulness to mindlessness" (Billig 1995, 41).

Given the extent of international non-recognition, Abkhazia is without doubt far from "being established in its sovereignty". But ironically, it was precisely the international isolation resulting from non-recognition that seemed to foster a certain ignorance regarding its international status. As I noticed during my fieldwork, many ordinary people living in Abkhazia seemed to have a limited understanding of the extent and implications of Abkhazia's non-recognition. For example, several of my interlocutors were astonished to hear that their passports would not be accepted when attempting to travel abroad or that their country would not appear on the map. Once, I spent a whole evening explaining the logistics of travelling to Europe to a group of former Abkhaz fighters. First, they struggled to believe that their Abkhaz passports would not be accepted and that they instead needed to use their Russian passports and still had to apply for visas. When I finished explaining the lengthy procedures, they looked at me in disbelief and once again asked, "Are you sure we can't just show our Abkhazian passport?" They also found it hard to believe that people in the West were not aware that Abkhazia – the *centre of their world* – existed and that their country would not appear on the map.[108]

It seemed that precisely *because* Abkhazia was so isolated and only few people travelled beyond Russia, the fact that Abkhazia was not recognised was not always straightforwardly present. This is not to say that it was not known on some abstract level, but – with the exception of politicians and NGO employees with a significant extent of international exposure – there appeared to be limited awareness of what that meant in practice. Especially for younger people, the

---

[108] As Peter Kabachnik (2012) has noted, national maps of Abkhazia have become more and more prominent in Abkhazia, where they are featured on various kinds of tourist souvenirs (ranging from t-shirts to mugs) and billboards. As a result, Kabachnik (2012, 403) argues, the national map "becomes an increasingly recognizable, natural and taken-for-granted aspect of life for Abkhazians."

Abkhazian state was the only one they knew and even though they were aware of its external threats and limitations, it was the state around which their lives were organised and that was thus perceived as self-evident and natural. After more than two decades since the end of the war, and especially since Russia's recognition in 2008, people were feeling more secure and confident in their state- and nationhood. However, the more the state seemed to become taken for granted, the more it opened up space for criticism. The re-assertion of everyday interests and the criticism it is based on were therefore not necessarily an indication of the failure of Abkhazian statehood, but to a certain extent a symptom of its increasingly "banal" nature.

At the same time, keeping in mind the sense of estrangement felt by those belonging to the so-called "lost generation", clearly not everyone relied on the state in the same way. In particular in rural areas people often seemed to exist largely outside of official state structures and my interlocutor's relationship to the state could seem quite tenuous. In fact, seeing it as an infringement on the many informal institutions that governed Abkhazian society, many liked to keep the state at a distance. However, while there were segments of society that were suspicious of the state's governmentality, they nevertheless appreciated its symbolic power. For both those relying on the state and those not relying on it, the state came to be seen as an indispensable symbolic embodiment of the nation. In fact, those who were at times most critical of the state and most reluctant to engage with its formal institutions looked at the same institutions as modern achievements and signs of the "civilisation" and progress that they had been fighting and hoping for.

What all this suggests is that while it is often people's frustrations with the Abkhazian state that motivates them to cross the conflict divide, it is simultaneously their belonging to the Abkhazian state (and hence nation) that provides them with the ontological security and confidence to encounter the enemy. In fact, the growing number of ethnic Abkhazians travelling to Georgia can itself be seen as an expression of a strengthened self-confidence in their belonging to the Abkhazian state and thus as an indication of Abkhazia's "banal nationalism". Consequently, "going to Georgia" both reproduces and subverts Abkhazian statehood: it is subversive to the extent that it is often (but not necessarily) grounded in a critique of Abkhazian statecraft and involves an engagement with the enemy state that does not recognise Abkhazia's independence; but, in crossing the state border, my interlocutors also performed Abkhazian citizenship, for they appeared to understand themselves as undertaking

their journey as citizens of Abkhazia and as thereby *reproducing* Abkhazian statehood.

This was also fostered by certain changes in the requirements for documents. In the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, the Georgian Dream coalition replaced Saakashvili's National Movement Party, which also led to certain changes in the approach to conflict resolution (which was most evident in the renaming of the Ministry of Reintegration to "Ministry of Reconciliation and Civic Equality"). The new minister, long-term civil society activist Paata Zakareishvili, "made it easier for the Abkhaz to travel to Georgia and access Georgian healthcare facilities, allowing them to present any identification document, *including an Abkhaz passport*" (De Waal 2018, 28; emphasis added). Whereas previously people were required to receive at least a Georgian ID number and a social insurance card, under the Georgian Dream coalition it sufficed to provide documentation of residency in Abkhazia. This was also part of a shift towards the de-politicisation of healthcare provision. As Zakareishvili (Menabde 2015, n.p.) noted in an interview, "[w]e do not want to advertise this process. Especially, as the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia still come over, despite all the obstacles. Nobody is able to prevent them from coming, and nobody is seriously trying to counter the people's wish to receive treatment in places where they can receive quality and free medical assistance."

7.3. Being "there": enemy relations and the expectation of civility

Consequently, what allowed my interlocutors to cross the conflict divide was not only certain frustrations *with* their Abkhazian state, but also the knowledge that they travelled as citizens *of* a separate Abkhazian state. They thus saw themselves as temporary visitors to another country, i.e. as "guests" in the Georgian state rather than its legal subjects. But expectations and traditions around host-guest relations could not only facilitate the decision to go; as I will show in this section, which focuses on the experience of "being 'there' [*tam*]'", they also structured complex interactions and tensions on "enemy" territory.

In early 2018, I had the opportunity to accompany one of my key informants, Timur, on his trip "to Georgia" with the aim of seeking medical treatment. As previously mentioned, Timur had never crossed the border before and it took him a long time to take the final steps. After he received official permission from the State

Security Services, there were several practical questions to deal with. Would he cross the border by foot or by car? How would he get to the train station in Zugdidi? Eventually, Timur arranged for someone to meet him on the other side so that his contact with the Georgian authorities, and therefore the likelihood of any confrontation, would be minimal. He was concerned that upon checking his surname they will immediately become aware that several of his family members had been heavily involved in the Abkhaz resistance. Fearing that he would struggle "to contain himself", Timur was afraid not only of the reaction of the Georgian authorities but also his own.

Timur crossed the border without complications and reached Tbilisi the next day. There, he was met by his distant Mingrelian relative, Gia, who fled Abkhazia after the war. It was not the first time that Gia picked up an Abkhaz relative coming for medical treatment: ever since the Georgian government launched their programme, he became something like a "gatekeeper" for people from his region in Abkhazia, driving them to hospitals and showing them around the city. Those who went to Georgia, either for medical or other reasons, often relied on the guidance and help of displaced Georgians they considered to be "trustworthy". These were usually relatives or former friends and neighbours who were not directly involved in the fighting. Gia, for instance, lived in multi-ethnic Ochamchira before the war and avoided conscription at all cost. He fled Abkhazia not because of any personal responsibility that could lead to retribution but because he was worried for the safety of his wife and children. In addition, he thought that they would be able to return after some time. While his hopes for return did not materialise (also because his wife was categorically against it, he told me), he nevertheless continued to visit Abkhazia and thus maintained good relations with many people there.

As "gatekeepers", people like Gia played an important role in the extent to which Abkhaz visitors could "enjoy" their stay. Despite reassurances by others who went before, after decades of horror stories, ethnic Abkhazians still feared for their safety when travelling to Georgia. Serving as mediators, trusted local "guides" made the journey easier and also allowed them to move around more freely. In Gia's experience, his Abkhaz visitors were usually fearful in the beginning but then realised that there was nothing to be afraid of: "The Abkhazians who come are treated with respect, even more so than locals... They receive special attention, like guests", he explained.

Indeed, once Timur arrived in Tbilisi, the initial fear quickly gave way to excitement. Looking at the newly renovated squares and streets in the surrounding area, he was astonished: "This is indeed a beautiful city! There is everything you need!" When we were driving towards the city's outskirts to Gia's house, intoxicated by all the new impressions, he shouted: "Here you can live a normal life! Of course, people like it here!" He was excited to be somewhere else and see something new, and in his mind, this opened up a whole new set of imagined opportunities of the lives he could have. "I think I'll just move here!", he once told me in the very beginning. However, Timur's euphoria had to be understood outside of the context of the conflict: he did not look at the city through an ethnic lens but as a "global" place of socio-economic opportunities. His appreciation of the city was grounded in a concern and desire for a "normal life" (see Jansen 2015) rather than a re-evaluation of the "enemy". At the same time, there were also moments when Tbilisi was recognised as the capital of Georgian culture; this, however, happened in a detached way, like a tourist recognising the achievements of a foreign country.

A few days after arriving in Tbilisi, he finally decided to get in touch with the hospital. He called a phone number that he had found on the internet and explained that he was from Abkhazia and interested in treatment options. Clearly taken by surprise, the person on the other end of the line invited him to come to the hospital. When we arrived a few hours later, Timur was met with curiosity; clearly, he was the first patient they had ever had from Abkhazia. The conversation evolved mostly around his medical history: where and when he had received treatment, what the healthcare system was like in Abkhazia and whether there were other people suffering from the same illness. Back in the taxi, Timur seemed generally satisfied with the way he had been received. One of the doctors suffered from the same disease, which had created an immediate bond. Having shaped his life considerably since early childhood, his disease – much like ethnicity – was a fundamental part of his identity. This opened up a space to relate to other patients as well as the medical personnel familiar with the complexities of his suffering. After he returned to the hospital the next day to be examined by a specialist, he told me how impressed he was by her professionalism: "She said to me: 'You don't have to tell me anything about yourself, just show me your leg.'" To him, this demonstrated that she was a "true specialist", i.e. someone who was solely concerned with his disease and its treatment, not "politics", treating him not like "an Abkhaz", but a *patient*.

In the following week, the hospital staff introduced Timur to a politician who was suffering from the same disease and, having been displaced from Abkhazia, was also actively engaged in the conflict resolution process. Having heard about Timur, he was curious to meet him and, after an initial encounter at his office, decided to invite him for dinner to his flat. This was when "politics" entered into Timur's affairs in Georgia. Feeling wary but also honoured and curious, Timur accepted the invitation and asked me to come along. Since the politician (Tamaz) was a Georgian "refugee" from Abkhazia, it was an ambivalent encounter: What united them was their disease and that they were both from Abkhazia; what separated them was their ethnicity and that unlike Timur, Tamaz could no longer live in Abkhazia. There were also important social, economic, cultural as well as generational differences, as Tamaz had been raised as part of the Soviet intelligentsia and later became politically active, whereas Timur had just finished school when the war started and ended up staying in the village to support his family. In his own words, he was a "*kolkhoznik*" ("villager") and "*ulichniy chelovek*" (a "street person") with little respect for the "dirty business" of politics.

Despite these differences, we were welcomed in accordance with the rules of hospitality. From the beginning, Tamaz stressed that, having the same disease, Timur was like a "brother" to him. For hours, they joked about the various doctors they had both encountered throughout their lives, especially in hospitals in Russia, where Timur had spent much time as a child. Then the conversation moved on to acquaintances they had in common in Abkhazia. Eventually, they started talking about the "elephant in the room" – the war and the conflict more generally. As previously, the emphasis was on commonalities, and how, even though they found themselves on different sides, they both shared the experience of war. They agreed that war is something that should not have happened and should never happen again. Timur said: "We lost so many people, on both sides. To me it is not even clear if there was a winner in this war." Then Tamaz made a toast: "To peace! That our children will never see war again!"

Tamaz also stressed the positive relationships that had (and to some extent still) existed between Georgians and ethnic Abkhazians, telling the story of an Abkhaz girl who fell in love with a Georgian partisan and who, in order to be able to get married, agreed to be abducted and brought to Georgia to live with him and his family. Upon realising what had happened, her own family decided to go after her

and take her back. But when they arrived "on the other side", they were surprised to see that she was genuinely in love and being well treated, so they decided to refrain from violence. In the end, "they all sat together eating and drinking – Georgian partisans and Abkhaz rebels!" According to Tamaz, there were many stories like that. Turning to me, he added that if Russia had not meddled, the conflict would have been long solved.[109]

Although coming from different backgrounds, both Tamaz and Timur were skilled in the art of "everyday diplomacy" (Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, and Henig 2016). Yet, despite their efforts to find a common ground and approach the topic with as much respect for the other as possible, talking about the conflict was nevertheless problematic. Reflecting on the evening, Timur later told me that it was painful for him to listen to Tamaz talk about the war:

> Of course, it would have been awkward not to mention it. It's like you have to talk about it. But it's painful to listen. Especially when he was talking about Russia's role. Yes, we all know that Russia is not innocent here. *But no one from the Georgian elite ever showed just the smallest sign of remorse, that they are sorry for what happened. Not a single person.* ... I tried very hard to hold myself together, but then I had to say something, so I mentioned how my uncle was shot immediately when the troops entered Sukhum. I didn't mean to provoke anything, but I had to say something. Also, all this talk about how we all suffered during the war. But the war itself was nothing, I can tell you. These people have no idea about what happened after the war.

Thus, even though alluding to the shared experience of war helped to bridge divisions, there was also a danger of reinforcing the feeling that the other will never truly understand the depths of one's own experience, both on an individual and on a collective level. But despite this tension, Timur did think that the dinner went well overall. "At least", he told me, "he [Tamaz] is not a nationalist." Therefore, while Timur and Tamaz did not resolve the tension between them, they were able to contain it, thereby interacting in a way that, although not bringing about "peace", can nevertheless be described as peaceful. Thus, as Laura Ring (2006) has demonstrated in her ethnographic research in a multi-ethnic apartment building in Karachi, Pakistan, everyday peace is the result of a laborious engagement with tension rather than its resolution.

---

[109] It is a common strategy among Georgians to displace blame on Russia (for a detailed discussion, see Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2012).

As Maria Eastmond and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic (2012) have shown in their research in Bosnia, silence can be crucial for managing tension in everyday encounters in post-war societies. In their view, silence is not simply the absence of speech, but "a form of social communication that is as rich and multifaceted as speech and narration" and "conveys a broad range of social meanings that, like speech, is always situated and can only be understood in its proper social context" (505–6). In contrast to the widespread understanding of silence as oppressive and conflict-supporting, their research reveals that silence can also function as "a means for bridging boundaries and producing possibilities for maintaining old relations and making new ones" (507). Silence can consequently also have an empowering effect, for "in a continuously polarized situation [...], people in everyday social interactions actively employ silence in ways that may empower by communicating respect and even trust, thus forming and sustaining relations important to viable local life" (507).

As the interaction between Timur and Tamaz illustrates, there is a fine line between the need to say *something* and the risk of *saying too much*. While Timur pointed out that not mentioning the war at all would have been awkward, going into too much detail would have been disrespectful and provocative. Striking the right balance meant that the dinner lived up to the standards of hospitality. As Paula Garb and John Whiteley (2001, 232) have pointed out, ceremonial dinners, and in particular the etiquette of toast making, are one "one of the main mechanisms of peacemaking in the Caucasus. Throughout a dinner all participants must raise their glasses of wine, vodka, or cognac more than once to articulate a meaningful point, either about the positive qualities of those present, the business of the day, or broader political and cultural issues. An arena for positive discourse is established, since this is a time for all to speak their minds to one another in a positive and encouraging way."

By mainly focusing on commonalities while simultaneously being respectful to differences, the encounter between Timur and Tamaz was successful precisely because it established an arena for positive discourse. Consequently, what mattered was not simply how much was said but also how it was said. Tamaz drew on a rich repertoire of local knowledge that enabled him to interact with Timur in a way that demonstrated basic respect. According to Timur this was what marked him – despite his political background – as a "native *Sukhumchanin*", i.e. someone who knows how to talk to people from different backgrounds. Hence, both Tamaz and Timur

exhibited what Anders Stefansson (2010, 232) in the context of Bosnia has called "a deep-seated cultural knowledge of living with difference, bridging difference, and to varying degrees accepting difference". While this did not necessarily mean that the two men liked each other, they certainly treated each other with respect. It thus demonstrates how certain cross-ethnic, local forms of belonging continued to be meaningful even across the conflict divide.

When I had to leave Tbilisi a few days later, I had no doubt that Timur, who had been received so warmly, was in good hands. However, it did not take long for his euphoria to wane. Whereas everything seemed great in the beginning, Timur's assessment of the people around him became more gloomy over time. As it turned out, the treatment that he needed was difficult to obtain in Georgia, leading to a situation where he was left waiting until an official decision was made on how to proceed with his case. It was during this time of uncertainty that he began telling me about his negative experiences. For instance, once he told me how an older woman at the market yelled at him when she realised that he was Abkhaz: "First she asked me where I was from and when I said that I am from Abkhazia, she started screaming: '*How come you can freely walk around here and we cannot go there?*' I told her: 'You better shut up! *It's exactly because of people like you that the war happened.*' I swear, if she hadn't been a woman, I would have punched her." In Timur's eyes, this woman – unlike Tamaz – was clearly a "nationalist" for at least two reasons: First, she looked at Timur solely through an ethnic lens, seeing him as part of an enemy nation, and second, she expressed her hostility openly and without hesitation.

According to Timur, showing outright hostility vis-à-vis a stranger, even if he or she belongs to the official enemy, was considered indecent behaviour. Hence, what becomes evident in these ordinary interactions is a certain everyday ethos or ethics of civility, where civility is understood as the ability to suppress, or conceal, one's negative emotions in order to create a space for respectful interaction. What Timur exhibited was a resistance to give in to the pain and trauma, and to some extent, this was rooted in an ideal of self-control that was traditionally of great significance among ethnic Abkhazians. Especially for men, openly showing one's emotions is usually frowned upon (e.g. Benet 1974, chap. 5). But there was also an understanding that, by openly employing an antagonistic collective categorisation and collective blame ascription, one was complicit in replicating the very dynamics behind the war and violence (such as the instance with the woman above). Of course,

suppressing the urge to exhibit negative emotions took a great deal of energy and could lead to feelings of frustration and anger that had to be released afterwards, and it became increasingly clear that my phone conversations with Timur certainly provided some much-needed space to "vent". And yet, while it was a tiring process, it was essential for establishing any kind of "normal" relationship in the context of intractable conflict.

On another occasion, Timur was invited to join a delegation on their trip to Batumi. One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to a newly built spa complex that was designed as a small-scale replica of Abkhazia. At the end of the tour, Timur was invited to come along to a dinner with a group of businessmen and public figures involved in the project. The atmosphere was tense and, as Timur later told me, their first toast was to Georgia's territorial integrity – in his eyes an unmistakable gesture of hostility. "I always try to say something reconciliatory, like toasting to peace, but they didn't make any effort", Timur recounted with deep consternation. Moreover, one of the businessmen told him to greet the people occupying their houses. "So many people died and the only thing that they worry about are *their houses*?", he told me angrily. What was interesting here was not so much that Timur did not know that the loss of houses was difficult for them – he himself once talked very empathetically about Gia, whose house was occupied by ethnic Abkhazians after the war. Once again, it was the hostility with which the topic was brought up which made any normal conversation impossible.

Over time, Timur became increasingly convinced that although "there are good people here [in Georgia], they are in a minority". This confirmed the essentially "evil" nature of the enemy: "Nationalism", he argued, "is in their blood". But he also saw it as something that was instilled from early childhood through sustained ideological work: "Like the Chechens who tell their children: 'the Russians are your enemy, the Russians are your enemy', so do they [the Georgians] tell their children: 'the Abkhaz are your enemy, the Abkhaz are your enemy'". Therefore, while Timur had been excited about all the opportunities in Georgia at the beginning of his stay, by the end of it he seemed disillusioned. "If there is one thing that I learned, it is that they will never recognise us", he told me on the phone. Just the night before, a guy had approached him and asked where he was from: "When I said I am Abkhaz, he smiled and replied: 'Abkhazians are also Georgians'. I really had to bite my tongue." Even though Timur "should have known better" (as he put it), he was still surprised

by the unwillingness of so many Georgians to "recognise" Abkhazia as separate, both politically (as a separate state) and ontologically (as a separate ethnicity).

What becomes evident here is that Timur's rejection of Georgian nationalism increasingly took on a nationalistic character of its own. As he continuously expressed his unease with "their" nationalism, collectively framing Georgians as "nationalists" also reproduced a logic of ethnic difference, whereby the Abkhaz are portrayed as more tolerant and reconciliatory and the Georgians as naturally prone to antagonism and thus characterised by a culture that breeds violence. There was little awareness of how his own behaviour could be interpreted as nationalistic or provocative. This does not mean that he was entirely blind to Abkhaz nationalism – after all, he was the one who called ethnic Abkhazians in Gudauta "nationalists" (see chapter 5). But, as he once stated, "nationalism exists in Abkhazia too, of course. But here [in Georgia], it exists more."

7.4.   Curiosity and (re-)connection

In the previous section, I explored my interlocutor's experience of seeking medical treatment in Georgia proper. While one of the side effects of his stay was that he reconnected with his distant relative Gia, this was not the reason why he went there in the first place. In this section, I want to focus on a certain desire or curiosity to reconnect that I noted among some of my contacts in Abkhazia. In particular, I am interested in the extent to which temporal and physical distance not only increase estrangement and a sense of separation, but can also have a "softening" effect. Whereas the public and private commemoration of the dead has sustained trauma, I suggest that temporal distance can enable those affected to adopt a more nuanced, or detached, stance on the past. As one of my contacts noted: "When there is war, people are caught by emotions. It makes them do certain sometimes extreme things … But after some time, they start thinking: 'Why did this happen? What have I done?' People start seeing past events in a different light, at least sometimes." The tendency to "forget" negative memories became particularly evident during my most recent visit to Abkhazia in spring 2019. I was drinking coffee with my contact Leon, an Abkhaz man in his 50s, when he looked at me with worry: "People are starting to forget, I can see it all around. But what can you do, that happens when time passes...

But I will tell you one thing: If the Georgians come back, relations won't be that friendly. There will be conflict."

After so much time had passed, some did indeed express a certain desire, or curiosity, to reconnect with former neighbours and friends – a process that has been facilitated by the growing popularity of social media. This was even the case for Leon who, when asked, held generally little sympathy for Georgians as an abstract category. Leon explained that, having been active in the Abkhaz resistance movement, he was on a black list of people prohibited from entering Georgia, making it impossible for him to cross.[110] While he was not able (and likely also not willing) to cross the conflict divide, during one of my visits Leon suggested a trip to a mountain village, where he had spent several summers before the war staying with a local Georgian family. Leon remembered the pristine beauty of the mountain range with excitement and I soon realised that going there was not only an opportunity to show me an area that few foreigners visited but also a chance for him to revisit a special place from his past. Before our trip, Leon had shown me a black-and-white picture of the woman that was going to host us together with her husband. As we were driving, he kept wondering what it would be like to see her again after all these years – and a war. I asked him how he had managed to contact her and he explained that he was put in touch by her sister, who is married to an Abkhaz and lives in Sukhumi and whose phone number he was able to obtain through common acquaintances.

When we arrived late in the evening, we were warmly welcomed and invited to take a seat around a big wooden table in the kitchen, where we were offered home-made *chacha* and wine. After Leon briefly introduced me, the conversation quickly shifted to socio-economic issues, in particular problems around farming – concerns that all seemed to be able to relate to. The tension grew as the conversation turned to the underlying political reasons. The couple talked about the hurdles they faced when entering Abkhazia from Georgia proper, for instance how all their luggage was meticulously checked by Russian border guards at the Georgian-Abkhaz checkpoint and how they needed to acquire a permission each time they entered just to visit their own house. "It will probably be the last year that we spend the summer here", the husband kept saying, and his wife, who usually stays in Tbilisi over the winter, nodded. Nostalgically, Leon agreed that the desolate condition of the village was

---

[110] I do not know to what extent this is accurate.

indeed a shame and then toasted to a prosperous future where their grandchildren will be able to visit and play outside in the garden. Looking at the couple, I detected contempt in the eyes of the woman, who seemed to be thinking that it was after all the fault of the Abkhazian government (and therefore implicitly also Leon) that things were so difficult for them. Half-jokingly, half-seriously she remarked: "But it was you [the Abkhaz] who wanted the Russians here! Now you are complaining that it is all ruined."

On our way back the next day, Leon seemed disappointed that the woman he had liked so much in his youth had apparently turned into someone slightly bitter and resentful. He told me: "These people, they just don't understand that it's their own fault. They blame us for the fact that the Russians are here, that they are under constant suspicion, but what do they expect? It was them who supported the Georgian troops; they were *killing us*." "Next time", he continued, "let's maybe stay somewhere else." What the visit thus showed was that the encounter between formal enemies – even well-meaning ones – can not only reduce but also reinforce prejudice.[111] And yet, despite the fact that the encounter seemed to have failed to dismantle certain suspicions (namely that Georgians do not take any responsibility for what happened), Leon nevertheless stayed in touch with our Georgian hosts, who called several times to check in. The result was therefore ambivalent: Although the encounter did not revive an old friendship, it also did not result in a shut-down of relations altogether. What was more important than *reconciliation*, it seemed, was (*re-)connection*: to reconnect with the people and places that were meaningful before the war. While the encounter did not resolve the tension and in some ways even produced new friction, both parties were able to manage it in a way that allowed continued communication – something that was perhaps only possible more than two decades after the war.

Curiosity and inter-group encounters, therefore, neither necessarily presupposed nor produced a desire for integration into a Georgian *state*. What it did, however, seem to entail is a desire to *normalise* relations – a desire that appears to be predicated on a sense of *separation*. This became particularly evident in the case of Khibla, the Abkhaz daughter of Abkhaz-Mingrelian parents. As I mentioned in

---

[111] The idea that intergroup contact (under the right conditions) can reduce prejudice goes back to Gordon Allport's seminal work *The Nature of Prejudic*e (1954). More recently, scholars have focused on the consequences of negative intergroup contact, which can increase prejudice (e.g. Meleady and Forder 2019).

chapter 5, Khibla regularly visited her relatives in Georgia proper. But going to Georgia was not just about family relations in a narrow sense; it was also an opportunity to express a part of her cultural heritage. Having been raised by a Mingrelian mother, Khibla has been familiar with the Mingrelian language and culture since childhood. Since the war, people had to conceal that part of their heritage and restrict it to the private sphere. When I visited Khibla in her small apartment in Sukhumi, she would sometimes turn on Georgian music in the evening and dance to it, but, as she explained to me, this was only possible because half of the house had been bombed and she had no immediate neighbours. On her trips to Georgia, she could more openly draw on the cultural repertoires that was transmitted through her mother's side of the family. When we had one of our more emotional conversations about Abkhazia's political prospects, she even declared: "There is no future for us with Russia. What do we have in common with them? *Nothing*. With them [Georgia/ns], we have *everything*."

However, while one might be tempted to take this as evidence for a certain willingness for Abkhazia's integration into Georgia, things were more complicated. As mentioned earlier, Khibla did understand herself to be an Abkhazian "patriot". This is not surprising for members of Abkhazia's post-war generation, who have had no first-hand experience of peaceful co-habitation of Georgians and Abkhaz within a unified state and therefore knew no alternative to independence. One evening, she confided to me: "Things are not so bad here in Abkhazia. I only wish the border [with Georgia] was open! Then it would be great." What Khibla seemed to imply was that she did not want Abkhazia to be part of a Georgian state; that was, in fact, unimaginable for her. Rather, she wanted to be able to move freely *between* the two entities, i.e. to live in an independent Abkhazia with open borders, allowing her to travel to Georgia at any time. A similar desire was expressed during a meeting with a young civil society activist. When I asked her how she felt about going to Georgia, she replied: "I would like to go, but I mean as a tourist... *like going to another country*. But this is something you can't usually say. Once I mentioned it to another student and he was shocked."

What this shows is that while the insistence on recognition, and thus separation, is often seen as a rejection of reconciliation and an expression of nationalism on the part of the Abkhaz, it can also be understood as based on a desire to move beyond nationalism and establish "normal relations" with Georgia. For

many Abkhaz, this would only be possible once their state is recognised, allowing them to feel secure in their sense of separateness and, as a consequence, to move beyond a preoccupation with identity politics. Of course, the issue with this logic is that it is one-directional: whereas some ethnic Abkhazians would be happy to go to Georgia as tourists, would they be equally happy to let Georgians travel to Abkhazia? As Leon mentioned in the beginning of this section: "I will tell you one thing: If the Georgians come back, relations won't be that friendly. There will be conflict."

7.5.   Conclusion

This chapter began with the observation that in recent years a growing number of ethnic Abkhazians have been travelling to Georgia. The aim was to explore the local meanings of this unprecedented cross-border movement. Does the growing cross-border mobility and frustration with the *de facto* state mean that Abkhazians are less devoted to the project of *de facto* state-building? I would say that the opposite is the case. While Abkhazians criticise the state for its shortcomings in terms of state*craft* (what the state should do), there is no doubt about Abkhazia's state*hood* (that it is and should be an independent state) (see Jansen 2015). Instead, 27 years after the war, Abkhazian state- and nationhood has been internalised by its residents as a taken-for-granted framework of social and political action. Among the people that I was in close contact with, those who were most critical of Abkhazia's current affairs were often also the biggest patriots, caring deeply about the development of "their people" (*narod*) and "their state" (*gosudarstvo*). While there was often doubt (why doesn't the state work well enough?), there was an understanding that it is still a young state that needs time to "mature".

Consequently, the growing numbers of ethnic Abkhazians travelling to Georgia can be seen as an indication of what Michael Billig (1995) has called banal nationalism. Over two decades after the end of the war, "being from Abkhazia" has become largely synonymous with "being a citizen of the Republic of Abkhazia". Whereas people in the past feared that they would be attacked as soon as they crossed the Inguri river, people now feel freer to openly say "I am from Abkhazia". Hence, while "going to Georgia" is subversive to the extent that it is an engagement with the enemy state that does not recognise Abkhazia's independence, as most of those who undertake the journey do so as citizens of Abkhazia, their actions can also

be seen as reproducing Abkhazian statehood. The readiness to encounter the official enemy is thus also predicated on a growing confidence of the Abkhazian state and its citizens and therefore an indication that the Abkhazian state has become increasingly taken for granted. Consequently, it is precisely this self-confidence that allows people to take the step to cross the conflict divide and normalise relations. This raises important questions about the value of separation, in particular whether separation should not only be seen as a strategy that cements ethnic divisions but also to soften them.

Focussing on interactions between ethnic Abkhazians and Georgians, the chapter also revealed an ethic of civility as a form of resistance against antagonistic collective categorisation and blame ascription. It showed how my interlocutor Timur continuously tried to restrain his own negative emotions vis-à-vis Georgians and expected a similar behaviour from his Georgian counterparts. While this did not mean that he necessarily trusted the people he encountered, according to his ethos of civility, overtly pre-judging a stranger, even if he or she categorically belonged to the collective enemy, was considered "nationalistic" and hence "indecent". This not only shows a longstanding tradition and knowledge of how to constructively engage with the "Other" in the midst of unresolved conflict but also once again illustrates the desire to engage in "normal" encounters that do not follow an ethno-nationalist script, according to which another person is judged primarily based on his or her nationality.

Chapter 8.   Conclusion

I began this thesis by arguing that the existing literature on post-Soviet wars and violent conflict has not paid enough attention to the relationship between identity and violence. Although it is no longer common sense within academia to look at identities through a primordial lens, i.e. as naturally occurring, with most scholars approaching identities as fundamentally *socially* constructed, it is still widely believed that violence is a *result* of antagonistically constructed identities.

Looking at Abkhazia, a *de facto* state in the South Caucasus that emerged from a war following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the aim of this thesis was not to reject this claim altogether. Undoubtedly, Soviet nationality policy shaped identities in ways that contributed to the outbreak of violence and continue to affect conflicts and their intractability to this day. In Abkhazia, it instilled a deep-seated link between the people and the land and fostered ideas of exclusive ownership of territory. As researchers have pointed out, the conflict was certainly not an elite phenomenon, but, to a large extent, "mass-led" (Kaufman 2001, 86). According to Nino Kemoklidze (2014, 295), both masses and elites were constrained and constituted by the same discursive space: "By the late 1980s, the interaction between Soviet institutional structures (shaped by Soviet nationality policies) and historical and cultural discourses (embedded in myths, symbols and metaphors) had produced a particular 'social reality' in Georgia in which an individual's identity was largely defined by a (socio-biological) primordialist view of ethnicity."

However, as I argue, the problem with this view is that it does not take into account the extent to which the meaning and strength of ethnic identification varies both across populations and time. To address this absence, I have adopted a bottom-up, agency-centred approach that moves beyond the top-down study of discourses and instead shifts the focus to both "ordinary people", i.e. people outside of the political and intellectual elites, as well as "ordinary periods", i.e. the everyday experience of identity across different periods and beyond specific events. As this approach revealed, not everyone in Abkhazia supported nationalism. For many, inter-ethnic conflict was not as endemic to society as contemporary scholarship makes it seem. These were people who had grown up in "mixed" environments and who defined themselves as much in local, cross-ethnic terms as they did in terms of ethnicity. For them, more open expressions of nationalism in the perestroika period

226

stood in sharp contrast to long-standing values of inter-group friendship. This does not mean that tensions did not exist. Historically, inter-ethnic relations in the region, and in particular Georgian-Abkhaz relations, were strained by the forced mass exodus of thousands of Abkhaz and related ethnicities throughout the second half of the 19th century and the subsequent resettlement of other nationalities, most notably (Mingrelian) Georgians to the depopulated areas. But these tensions did not overdetermine relations on the ground: as this research suggests, ethnicity was not usually the primary lens through which people looked at each other.

By demonstrating that a cross-ethnic, "inter-national" community existed in Abkhazia in spite of certain political tensions, the thesis thus challenges the dominant view of the Soviet Union as a "communal apartment" (Slezkine 1994) which conceptualises nationalities as clearly bounded (and hence separate) units living side by side. It reveals that, in Abkhazia, large-scale social segregation along ethnic lines only intensified in the second half of 1989 following clashes between activists – the first significant instance of intercommunal violence and the first indication of the transformative impact of violence on communal relations in the period of late socialism. However, while tensions were certainly running high before August 1992, even after the first clashes in 1989 war was not inevitable: As I have argued in chapter 4, rather than an escalation of micro-level unrest, the decision to send troops to Abkhazia was taken on the level of the republican centre in Tbilisi. In fact, even Kaufman (2001, 126), who stresses the mass-led character of the conflict, concedes that "in many ways the war in Abkhazia was highly artificial. [...] In sum, if mass passions were driving political conflict and personal confrontation, individual leaders' decisions turned those elements into war."

Witness accounts of the violence that unfolded when the troops entered Abkhazia suggest that ethnic hatred was not the main or sole motivation for atrocities. Instead, ethnicity was often used as a justification to target certain people for looting. Following Lee Ann Fujii (2009, 12), I argue that ethnicity thus functioned as a "script". But while violence was not necessarily motivated by ethnic hatred, it exacerbated its spread. Not only did it cause a collective, generalised fear of "Georgians", but also a desire for revenge that fed into a vicious cycle of violence and counterviolence and ultimately paved the way for the mass displacement of the Georgian population from Abkhazia. As both ethnic Abkhazians and Georgians came to perceive those belonging to the other "group" as a potential threat to their physical

safety, living side by side was no longer possible if one wanted to avoid further violence. And yet, fear did not automatically equal hostility and hatred. Some of my interlocutors reported helping their Georgian neighbours, friends or relatives escape not because they wanted them to leave but because they could no longer guarantee their safety. Hence, among those who left, there were people who had not shown any particular support for either side and/or had close ties to ethnic Abkhazians. Not only could their Abkhaz neighbours and friends not guarantee *their* safety, but by associating themselves with Georgians, they also put their own lives at risk.

This demonstrates that, by creating a hostile, antagonistic environment, wartime atrocities had a profound transformative impact on inter-ethnic relations. But is also shows that there was still individual variation in people's emotional response, attesting to Torsten Kolind's (2008, 40; emphasis added) observation in the Bosnian context that "[v]iolence plays a part in constructing a general polarised atmosphere of 'us and them', *but this does not say anything about how people react or relate to such a dichotomised space of identity*." In fact, by looking beyond the war, the thesis reveals that although ethnic nationalism became the pervasive response to the violence committed, and that violence thus fostered antagonistic nationalism (where every member of the other group is an enemy), there are ways in which nationalism continued – and continues – to be challenged or resisted. In post-war Abkhazia, people continued to appeal to internationalism as a discursive strategy to unite the various ethnicities living in Abkhazia while simultaneously distancing themselves from "imperialist" Georgia. In doing so, they drew upon the history of Abkhazia as a multinational place and the norms of peaceful inter-group co-existence that existed before the war, thus locating the threat not within the fact of ethnic diversity but in the attempt on the part of Georgian elites to nationalise, or "Georgify" Abkhazia and hence in nationalism itself – or chauvinistic, "Bourgeois" nationalism, to be more accurate.

But this recourse to an internationalist "script" cannot conceal that the degree of social integration between the different "groups" in post-war Abkhazia became limited (they do, in many ways, exist as "groups"). While internationalism hence continues to be an important resource, it is no longer the "lived" internationalism of pre-war times. In fact, the problem with an "anti-nationalism" grounded in ideas of internationalism and the friendship of peoples is that it is itself rooted in a national cosmology, or, what Malkki (1992, 25) calls "the national order

228

of things". For while it draws upon the multinational history of Abkhazia, it is ultimately predicated on the idea that the different ethnicities residing in Abkhazia, regardless of the length of their attachment to the territory, are rooted in historical homelands outside of Abkhazia – with the exception of the Abkhaz themselves who have no other homeland. This, as I argue, creates a hierarchy, where the Abkhaz are "the first among equals", making other ethnicities perpetually indebted to the Abkhaz titular ethnicity.

The thesis thus also lays bare the fundamental ambiguity of the concept of internationalism, which appears both antithetical to nationalism and to be an extension of it. Carline Humphrey (2004, 141), for instance, distinguishes internationalism from cosmopolitanism, arguing that although the two concepts are often linked, "they are very different beasts". Unlike cosmopolitanism, which is based "on universalism, a state of being without socio-political boundaries", internationalism is "perforce imaginable only in territorial terms, for example, as landed blocks, which engage in co-operative behavior with one another (treaties, law-governed trade, 'friendship pacts' and so on)" (2004, 142). This, however, does not mean that no cosmopolitanism – or what I call "lived internationalism" – existed in Soviet times. According to Humphrey (2004, 146), "[s]ome cities, which had been ethnically mixed from the start and gained further contingents from Soviet development policies, became truly cosmopolitan spaces. Almost despite itself, internationalism – because it denied conflict and encouraged common values – enabled an unacknowledged cosmopolitanism to flourish."

And yet, while lived internationalism no longer existed in people's everyday lives in the way it did before the war, this research demonstrates that "inter-national" forms of belonging continued to be meaningful, albeit in different forms, including (private) melancholia or (public) nostalgia for the cosmopolitan past. These feelings were also the result of certain changes that took place after the war, such as the large-scale migration of ethnic Abkhazians within Abkhazia, which could cause a longing for those ethnic others who once belonged to the local social and cultural fabric but fled out of fear. This is not to suggest that the loss of ethnic kin was not dominant; but it was not the *only* loss with which people had to come to terms in the aftermath of war and displacement. There was a loss of peaceful multi-ethnic co-existence that could manifest itself in melancholia as well as in anger directed at the "enemy" for spreading nationalistic chauvinism and unleashing

violence but also frustration with one's own people, in particular the "new Abkhaz" and the rural newcomers, whose arrival fundamentally changed the social and cultural fabric. It was not simply a loss of individual people but of a specific kind of community that was ethnically diverse but *socially and culturally familiar*.

But the thesis also documents instances where pre-war forms of cross-ethnic belonging across the conflict divide continued to exist, allowing people categorically belonging to different "sides" to bridge their differences. Post-war Abkhazia can therefore not simply be understood as a place where cosmopolitanism was replaced by nationalism, but more accurately as "post-cosmopolitan" (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012, 6), i.e. as a place where despite ethnic tensions, "some cosmopolitan sensibilities, dispositions and affiliations can linger on."

In addition to a somewhat ambiguous post-war internationalism, the thesis also uncovered an everyday ethos of civility as a more radical form of resistance to nationalist categorisation. According to this ethos, showing outright hostility vis-à-vis a stranger, regardless of whether he or she categorically belongs to the official enemy, is considered "indecent". "Decent" behaviour, in contrast, requires the suppression of one's urge to demonstrate hostility openly and, thus, to be able to transcend the pain and trauma caused by experiences and memories of violence. This was partly based on the conviction that, in giving in to that urge, one was reinforcing the logic behind the war and the violence. Within this context, then, nationalism was rejected as a toxic ideology that was *imposed* on people rather than an expression of an "authentic" desire. And yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, there was more sympathy for the failure to do so among one's co-ethnics, whereas those belonging to the Other were perceived as more prone to give in to their "trauma". Nevertheless, what this demonstrates is that despite the general atmosphere of antagonism and the memories of violence (collective and individual), there was a certain expectation for people to be able to "manage" their negative emotions in order to engage with others in a restrained yet civil manner. This ideal of civility also became apparent in relation to the discourse surrounding the so-called "trophy houses" and the moral dilemmas that they posed. Despite the break-down of neighbourly relations, taking over a "trophy house" was considered somewhat shameful and indecent (although there were of course nuances). Even in the aftermath of war, not all norms of inter-group behaviour were suspended.

In my understanding, the ability to behave in a civil manner was, to some extent, fostered by temporal and spatial distance and a degree of separation stemming from it. Politically, the ethos of civility translated into the consideration to re-establish "neighbourly" relations; however, this time not as door-to-door neighbours but *neighbouring countries*. Hence, while my research did not reveal a desire for re-unification or re-integration into a common Georgian state, it detected a certain ability and willingness to rebuild and "normalise" relations both on a personal and a political level. While my interlocutors wished that Georgia would finally recognise Abkhazia as an independent state, in my interpretation they did so partly in the hope that this would finally "normalise" relations and allow for non-politicised and hence non-ethnicised modes of interaction. Hence, the desire for recognition was not only an expression of Abkhaz nationalism, but also perceived as a way to move *beyond* it. This once again demonstrates the ambiguity of internationalism, where a demand for having one's collective place in the "national order of things" is simultaneously seen as enabling transcendence of these boundaries.

One of the key findings of this thesis is that inter-ethnic relations have not only been informed by what happened before and during the war, but also *after*, and not only between the conflicting parties but also within the Abkhaz community itself. As I show, in the post-war period, intra-ethnic relations were far more fractured than one might assume. Ethnic "others" or those from "mixed" families were not the only ones perceived to be a threat to Abkhaz identity. There were also the "new Abkhaz" whose material aspirations threatened to erode established values. In the aftermath of war and displacement, the challenge was thus not only how to live with the ethnic others that continued to reside in Abkhazia as well as how to live *without* certain ethnic others, including Georgians, but also how to live with "your own people".

Moreover, what proved difficult was not only having to adjust to newcomers due to internal migration, but also to a reality of being surrounded by *fewer* people. Depopulation significantly shaped post-war social relations: for many, fewer people meant being stuck with the same people without having the ability to "escape" due to international isolation. The thesis thus also described a recurring sense of claustrophobia and fatigue as the flipside of ethnic intimacy and depopulation in the post-war period. However, people felt "morally exhausted" not only because of the monotony of their social lives, but also because of its unpredictability. While mistrust

is often associated with inter-ethnic relations, as the thesis showed, trust was not something that existed naturally between ethnic Abkhazians. This, however, does not mean that there was no solidarity; as I showed, intra-ethnic friction was also an outcome of people's increased reliance on each other, not so much the absence thereof.

This seems to complicate the assumption that war leads to ethnic cohesion or suggests that if it does, then rather temporarily. However, instead of invoking the decline of the Abkhaz nation, I suggest that this invites us to rethink post-war identity (and national identity more generally). While the grievances expressed seemed to give voice to the decline of a community, they were simultaneously an expression of a collective experience and thus constitutive of Abkhazia's post-war identity. What made the community, then, was not only the shared experience of Georgian aggression but also the shared experience of estrangement from certain segments of one's own ethnic "group". Post-war relations were hence characterised by a certain degree of ambiguity and/or ambivalence, where relations between co-ethnics can seem simultaneously close and distanced. Listening to my interlocutors' complaints one was tempted to believe that there was little that held people together, when at the same time, it was these very complaints and the intimate knowledge they expressed that marked people's belonging to the post-war nation. Hence, the thesis also shows that in disrupting existing cultural intimacies, war and violence also created new forms of intimacy. Post-war intimacy then is best understood not solely in positive terms, but as an intimate knowledge and familiarity with both the good and the bad "stuff" that has come to characterise one's community in times of turmoil. As becomes clear, the post-war condition is not exclusively one of ethnic harmony but one where it is not always clear who is your friend and who is your foe; however, being able to navigate this complex social field is precisely what marks belonging.

The thesis thus both confirms and challenges existing scholarship on identity and violence. As I demonstrate in the first part of the thesis, ethnic antagonism was not simply the cause of violence but largely its outcome. It therefore supports existing scholarship that suggests that violence has the power to generate new relationships. But as I also show, it is not just the experience of violence that shapes post-conflict relations, but also the experience of post-war changes. Focusing on the period after the "event" of war, the thesis thus illustrates the challenges that a

community faces once war is over and the parties in conflict have become separated, a period in which an external enemy continues to unite people – especially as the conflict remains unresolved – but, due to both physical and temporal distance, has also become somewhat distant. Consequently, even though the language of ethnic difference has remained powerful in Abkhazia, more than two decades on people's concerns have shifted towards the new power dynamics within which their post-war lives unfolded.

The war might thus be best understood as a period of liminality, which, characterised by uncertainty and indeterminacy, produces "a shared sense of *communitas* – brotherhood, egalitarianism, a symbolic leveling of status" but is ultimately "only a temporary phenomenon, unsustainable when a system returns to some kind of normalcy" (Ries 1997, 164). To some extent, the assertion of internal differences can thus be seen as a "normal" part of the process of post-war re-construction. While everything seemed possible during the war, once it was over and the initial euphoria of the military victory began to fade people were increasingly confronted with the physical and psychological damages in their immediate environment. This attests to Brubaker's (2004, 4) argument that groupness "is a variable, not a constant; it cannot be presupposed. It varies not only across putative groups, but within them; it may wax and wane over time, peaking during exceptional–but unsustainable–moments of collective effervescence." However, in order to understand the dynamics in Abkhazia, it is important to disaggregate groupness, for while Abkhazians seem increasingly discontent with the ways in which their state works (or does not work), they remain largely united in their support for the existence of a common state. More than twenty-five years after the end of war it has, in fact, become widely unimaginable for Abkhazians to not have their own state. In this sense, the existence of an Abkhazian state has indeed become tantamount to the survival of the Abkhaz "ethnos".

Hence, rather than challenging the notion of "group" in the post-war period as such, the thesis invites us to re-think national "groupness" as inherently agonistic. As Michael Herzfeld has so aptly illustrated in the case of Greece, belonging to the nation-state means being both suspicious of the state and its most ardent defender. Consequently, distancing oneself from the state is not necessarily an act against it, but a performance of belonging. Writing about the attitudes of Cretan villagers to the Greek state, Herzfeld (2005, 36) argues that

> [t]he prominence of the state's legal institutions in their lives signals a fall from social harmony, and the state is itself the target of all sorts of criminality – tax evasion, bribery, perjury that the villagers represent as fair revenge for its interfering rapacity. From the villagers' standpoint, however, these marks of sinfulness are an important part of what makes the state itself more human and the nation worth defending. Its formal face is merely the defensive posture, not what is actually defended. People do not fight for abstract perfection but for the intimacies that lie behind it.

Similarly, it is at the very core of Abkhaz identity to keep the state at distance while being ready to mobilise and sacrifice one's life in its defence; just like it is part of Abkhaz identity to mistrust anyone who does not belong to one's kinship network while defending the same people as one's own ethnic kin when an external threat arises. Consequently, the point of this thesis is not simply to juxtapose an agonistic post-war identity with a harmonious pre-war one, but to illustrate the very ambivalence and ambiguity of national belonging, both in times of peace and in times of conflict.

8.1.   Contribution

As a work of critical interdisciplinary area studies, this thesis contributes to several strands of scholarships across several disciplines. First, it contributes to the literature on ethnicity and national identity in the (former) Soviet Union and beyond. It does so both methodologically – by adopting a bottom-up, agency-centred approach – as well as conceptually – by focusing not only on nationalism, but also on forms of "lived" internationalism. As I argued at the beginning of this thesis, most of the literature on national identity in the Soviet Union has focused on nationality *policy* and hence adopted an institutional perspective rather than on ethnicity as lived experience. Moreover, while much attention has been paid to the success of the nation-building efforts of the Soviet period, few works have looked at attempts at Soviet assimilation and homogenisation and how ideologies of internationalism and the friendship of peoples have been received on the ground. Focusing on Abkhazia, this thesis has shown that even though there was certainly an awareness of ethnic difference and intermarriage was not necessarily the norm, many people saw themselves as part of an international community based on shared local norms. Ethnicity only became highly salient during and after the war. What this

demonstrates, of course, is that cross-ethnic, international belonging was not strong enough to *prevent* the community from disintegrating. However, to argue that it was not strong enough does not mean that it did not exist and was not meaningful to actors on the ground. The thesis thus attests to the existence of both nationalism and internationalism as lived experience throughout the Soviet period, and, in doing so, moves beyond a zero-sum approach. Moreover, it shows that even though nationalism has certainly become the hegemonic ideology in the post-Soviet/post-war period, certain forms of inter-national belonging continued – and continue – to exist.

Second, the thesis contributes to the study of ethnic conflict in the FSU by focussing on the role of violence. While many scholars have studied the factors leading to the outbreak of mass violence, few have taken an in-depth look at the ways in which violence itself impacts the course of events both in the short and in the long run. As Chaim Kaufmann (1996, 154) has argued, "[e]ven if constructivists are right that the ancient past does not matter, recent history does. Intense violence creates personal experiences of fear, misery, and loss which lock people into their group identity and their enemy relationship with the other group." By demonstrating how the experience of violence fostered a pattern of collective blame ascription that largely suspended the distinction between civilians and fighters and led to a widespread perception of the displaced Georgians not as helpless victims but as deeply complicit, the thesis sheds light on the intractability of the conflict from an intimate perspective.

Whereas scholars often like to highlight the role of Russia, the thesis thus demonstrates how violence reshaped people's identities in ways that made peaceful cohabitation in the near future unimaginable. However, in addition to showing how emic conceptions of retributive justice reinforced the conflict, the thesis also reveals longstanding traditions of civility that continue to regulate interpersonal relations across the conflict divide. It shows that traditionally, enemy relations are not free of moral constraints but follow certain rules of what counts as decent behaviour. By attending to local moral discourses and the doubts implicated in them, the thesis is also careful to avoid reproducing popular notions of the Caucasus as a place prone to ruthless violence and instead pays attention to the ways in which the regulation of enemy relations is not only of concern for a somewhat distant international community and for local actors alike.

Looking beyond the immediate event of war, the thesis also contributes to the scholarship on political violence and nationalism and ethnicity more broadly. In particular, it enhances our understanding of ethnic cleansing and mass displacement by focusing (a) on the aftermath of ethnic cleansing rather than the factors leading to it and (b) by exploring the repercussions not for the people who were displaced but for those who stayed behind. It does so by investigating an understudied aspect, namely the take-over of evacuated properties. While similar studies have been conducted in Cyprus – most notably by anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin – works on similar issues in the former Soviet Union have remained rare. As I have elaborated in the previous section, exploring post-war social relations through the lens of material repossession has provided a more nuanced understanding of both inter- and intra-ethnic relations. In particular, it demonstrated that it is not only the violence committed against members of one's own group that shape post-war collective identity, but also violations committed against those belonging to the Other.

The thesis therefore stresses the importance of studying countervailing narratives for understanding post-war identities (and identities more generally). It also highlights the need to study narratives not only as a window into past events and how they were experienced, but by paying attention to their functional, performative, and contextual aspects, also for their own sake. As I hope this thesis illustrates, the prolonged, informal engagement with non-elite actors through participant observation, although time-consuming, is particularly suited to achieving these goals.

Finally, the thesis also adds to the growing literature on frozen conflict and *de facto* states. As I mentioned in the beginning, most of the existing research on *de facto* states has adopted a top-down, institutional approach to ethnicity. This work, in contrast, has focused on ethnicity and nationhood as lived experience. In doing so, it showed that although *de facto* state- and nation-building does lead to the consolidation of national identity and hence contributes to further separation from Georgia, it also fostered a certain process of normalisation, which in turn can equip actors on the ground with a certain confidence to encounter the official "enemy". As such, the thesis invites us to rethink the value of spatial and temporal separation in the aftermath of conflict, pointing towards the possible conflict-reducing aspects of separation.

8.2. Future research

While this research answered many questions, it also raises new ones. The first question is: How does Abkhazia compare to other cases? Drawing on secondary literature on conflicts across the world, this thesis has revealed striking parallels between Abkhazia and other conflict-affected societies, including Bosnia, Rwanda and Cyprus. But what about the other cases in the former Soviet space? Abkhazia is not the only unrecognised state in the FSU and not the only one that emerged from a process of ethnic cleansing. Both South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh have experienced intense fighting that resulted in the forced expulsion of local Georgians in South Ossetia and Azeris in Nagorny Karabakh. Exploring the differences and similarities in local discourses around the experience of violence and forced expulsion would be one way to expand this research. How was the re-distribution of evacuated properties managed in these other regions and was there (and perhaps, is there still) a similar sense of shame – and if not, why?

Another question that this research raises is the extent to which individual experiences of violence correspond to attitudes towards nationalism. What impact does the exposure to severe violence, either committed against oneself or against close family members have on people's ability to resist antagonistic blame ascription? Is an ethos of civility something that only people with lesser exposure and who, as a consequence, are less traumatised can afford? In this thesis, I have not distinguished between the different levels and forms of exposure to violence that my interlocutors experienced. The reason was both ethical and methodological: I did not usually push my contacts to share difficult memories and, as a consequence, did not ask for sensitive information if they did not share it themselves.

The sensitivity of the research context, and the need to ensure both the security of my interlocutors and my own certainly constrained my ability to obtain information that would have been of great interest from an intellectual point of view. Another such question was that of foreign involvement in the war. This concerns not so much Russia's more general political and military role than the role of non-Abkhaz fighters in the execution of atrocities. Among those who were mentioned by my interlocutors as especially cruel were Chechens, Kabardians and Cossacks. Was mention of these fighters merely a strategy to displace responsibility for war crimes?

A better knowledge of the involvement of non-Abkhaz fighters, their motivations and their respective moralities would further contribute to our understanding of the violence that has shaped Georgian-Abkhaz relations and as well as violent conflict in the Caucasus more generally.

Finally, a topic of particular interest that emerged from my research is that of the trajectories of so-called "mixed" families. While I included some of their histories in this thesis, I hope that future research will allow me to further explore this phenomenon beyond the "Mingrelian wives" in Abkhazia. As I mentioned in chapter 5, many mixed families ended up on neither side of the conflict but instead went to more "neutral" places such as Russia and Ukraine. Why did they decide to go there instead? Collecting their stories, in particular around how they have been navigating their lives in the context of unresolved conflict and ongoing polarisation, and the various affects that it generated, would be one of my goals for future research. This is not least because their fate rarely ever features in any discussions of the "human costs" of the conflict but, as I hope this thesis showed, is at the heart of it.

Bibliography

Achugba, Temur. 2010. *Etnicheskaia Istoriia Abkhazov XIX-XX vv. [The Ethnic History of the Abkhaz in the XIX-XXth Centuries]*. Sukhum: Abkhazian Academy of Sciences.

Agumaa, Anzor. 1999. *The Architecture of Sukhum: Late 19th and 20th Century*. Sukhum: Sukhum Society of Abkhaz History and Culture.

Allport, Gordon. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Amstutz, Mark R. 2005. *The Healing of Nations: The Promise and Limits of Political Forgiveness*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Anchabadze, Jurij. 1999. "History: The Modern Period." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt, 132–46. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, New York: Verso.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1998. "Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization." *Public Culture* 10 (2): 225–47.

Ardzinba, Vladislav. 2004. *Te Surovye Dni. Khronika Otechestvennoi Voiny Naroda Abhazii 1992-1993 Gg. v Dokumentakh [Those Harsh Days. A Chronicle of the Patriotic War of the People of Abkhazia 1992-93 in Documents]*. Sukhum: Dom pechati.

Arel, Dominique. 2001. "Fixing Ethnicity in Identity Documents: The Rise and Fall of Passport Nationality in Russia." *The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research*.

Artman, Vincent M. 2013. "Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." *Geopolitics* 18 (3): 682–704.

Arutyunyan, Yurik, and Yuri Bromley, eds. 1986. *Sotsial'no-Kul'turnyi Oblik Sovetskikh Natsii [The Socio-Cultural Aspect of Soviet Nations]*. Moscow: Nauka.

Ascherson, Neal. 2011. *Black Sea. Coasts and Conquests: From Pericles to Putin*. London: Vintage Books.

Baev, K. Pavel. 2003. "Civil Wars in Georgia: Corruption Breeds Violence." In *Potentials of Disorder: Explaining Conflict and Stability in the Caucasus and in the Former Yugoslavia*, edited by Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher, 127–44. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bakke, Kristin M., John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Michael D. Ward. 2012. "Convincing State-Builders? Disaggregating Internal Legitimacy in Abkhazia."

International Studies Quarterly 58: 591–607.

Bandura, Albert. 1999. "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (3): 193–209.

Bar-Siman-Tov, Yacoov. 2014. *Justice and Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. London, New York: Routledge.

Bar-Tal, Daniel. 2004. "Siege Mentality." In *Beyond Intractability*, edited by Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. University of Colorado, Boulder: Conflict Information Consortium.

———. 2013. *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bar-Tal, Daniel, and Dikla Antebi. 1992a. "Beliefs about Negative Intentions of the World: A Study of the Israeli Siege Mentality." *Political Psychology* 13 (4): 633–45.

———. 1992b. "Siege Mentality in Israel." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 16 (4): 471–72.

Bar-Tal, Daniel, and Gavriel Salomon. 2006. "Israeli-Jewish Narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Evolution, Contents, Functions, and Consequences." In *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg, 19–46. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Baudelaire, Eric. 2014. *Letters to Max [Documentary]*. France.

Bauman, Richard. 1986. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beissinger, Mark R. 1995. "The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11 (2): 149–84.

———. 2004. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benet, Sula. 1974. *Abkhasians: The Long-Living People of the Caucasus*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Berg, Eiki, and Martin Mölder. 2012. "Who Is Entitled to 'Earn Sovereignty'? Legitimacy and Regime Support in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabagh." *Nations and Nationalism* 18 (3): 527–45.

Berghe, Pierre L. van den. 1978. "Race and Ethnicity: A Sociobiological Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1 (4): 401–11.

Bergholz, Max. 2016. *Violence As a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Bgazhba, Oleg. 1999. "History: First-18th Centuries." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt, 59–66. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Bgazhba, Oleg, and Stanislav Lakoba. 2007. *Istoriia Abkhazii: S Drevneishikh Vremen Do Nashikh Dnei [The History of Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present Day]*. Sukhum.

Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Blankoff-Scarr, Goldie. 1988. "Soviet Multinational Literature: The Abkhaz Fazil Iskander." *Central Asian Survey* 7 (1): 37–61.

Blauvelt, Timothy. 2007. "Abkhazia: Patronage and Power in the Stalin Era." *Nationalities Papers* 35 (2): 203–32.

———. 2012. "Resistance and Accommodation in the Stalinist Periphery: A Peasant Uprising in Abkhazia." *Ab Imperio* 3: 78–108.

———. 2014a. "'From Words to Actions!' Nationality Policy in Soviet Abkhazia (1921-38)." In *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian Republic and Its Successors*, edited by Stephen F. Jones, 232–62. New York: Routledge.

———. 2014b. "The Establishment of Soviet Power in Abkhazia: Ethnicity, Contestation and Clientelism in the Revolutionary Periphery." *Revolutionary Russia* 27 (1): 22–46.

Blauvelt, Timothy, and Jeremy Smith. 2016. "Introduction." In *Georgia After Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power*, edited by Timothy K. Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith, 1–12. London: Routledge.

Boym, Svetlana. 2010. "Nostalgia." Atlas of Transformation. 2010. http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html (accessed 30 August 2019).

Branscombe, Nyla R., and Anca M. Miron. 2004. *Interpreting the Ingroup's Negative Actions Toward Another Group. The Social Life of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brass, Paul R. 1991. "Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison." *Pacific Affairs*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Bringa, Tone. 1995. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Broers, Laurence. 2009. "'David and Goliath' and 'Georgians in the Kremlin': A Post-Colonial Perspective on Conflict in Post-Soviet Georgia." *Central Asian Survey* 28 (2): 99–118.

———. 2012. "'Two Sons of One Mother': Nested Identities and Centre-Periphery Politics in Post-Soviet Georgia." In *When the Elephant Broke Out of the Zoo: A Festschrift for Donald Rayfield*, edited by Andreas Schönle, 234–67. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brown, Kate. 2003. *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers. 1996. *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2002. "Ethnicity without Groups." *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 43 (2): 163–89.

———. 2004. *Ethnicity Without Groups*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Brubaker, Rogers, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea. 2006. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bryant, Rebecca. 2010. *The Past in Pieces: Belonging in the New Cyprus*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

———. 2014a. "History's Remainders: On Time and Objects after Conflict in Cyprus." *American Ethnologist* 41 (4): 681–97.

———. 2014b. "Living with Liminality: De Facto States on the Threshold of the Global." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XX (1): 125–43.

Bürge, Michael. 2018. "Mis(Sing) Trust for Surviving Confronting Complexity and the Un/Known in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone." In *Mistrust: Ethnographic Approximations*, edited by Florian Mühlfried, 106–28. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Buric, Fedja. 2012. "Becoming Mixed: Mixed Marriages of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the Life and Death of Yugoslavia." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Bzhania, Georgii. 2005. *Syn dolgozhitelia, otets tysiach uchenikov [Son of a Centarian, Father of Thousands of Students]*. Sukhum: Dom Pechati.

Čapo Žmegač, Jasna, Christian Voß, and Klaus Roth, eds. 2010. *Co-Ethnic Migrations Compared: Central and Eastern European Contexts*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Carsten, Janet, and Stephens Hugh-Jones. 1995. "Introduction." In *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, edited by Janet Carsten and Stephens Hugh-Jones, 1–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Caspersen, Nina. 2008. "Separatism and Democracy in the Caucasus." *Survival* 50 (4): 113–36.

———. 2012. *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Chanba, Samsun. 1982. *Na Puti k Soznatel'nosti [On the Way to Consciousness]*. Sukhumi: Alashara.

Chirikba, Viacheslav A. 1996. *Common West Caucasian: The Reconstruction of Its Phonological System and Parts of Its Lexicon and Morphology*. Leiden: Research School CNWS, Leiden University.

Christophe, Barbara. 2003. "Bringing Culture Back into a Concept of Rationality: State-Society Relations and Conflict in Post-Socialist Transcaucasia." In *Potentials of Disorder*, edited by Jan Koehler and Christoph Zürcher, 193–207. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Civil Georgia. 2004. "Saakashvili's Vows Improvements with Drastic Measures." January 25, 2004. http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=6090 (accessed 22 December 2019).

Clogg, Rachel. 1995. "Documents from the KGB Archive in Sukhum. Abkhazia in the Stalin Years." *Central Asian Survey* 14 (1): 155–89.

———. 1999. "Religion." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt, 205–17. Richmond: Curzon Press.

———. 2008. "The Politics of Identity in Post-Soviet Abkhazia: Managing Diversity and Unresolved Conflict." *Nationalities Papers* 36 (2): 305–29.

Cohen, Dov, and Richard E. Nisbett. 1994. "Self-Protection and the Culture of Honor: Explaining Southern Violence." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20 (5): 551–67.

Cohen, Stanley. 2001. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*.

Cambridge: Polity.

Colarusso, John. 1995. "Abkhazia." *Central Asian Survey* 14 (1): 75–96.

———. 2002. *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Conterio, Johanna. 2015. "Inventing the Subtropics: An Environmental History of Sochi, 1929–36." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16 (1): 91–120.

Coppieters, Bruno. 2000. "Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict." In *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, edited by Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, 21–58. Brussels: VUB University Press.

———. 2002. "In Defence of the Homeland: Intellectuals and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict." In *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, edited by Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune, 89–116. Brussels: VUB Brussels University Press.

———. 2004. "The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict." In *Europeanization and Conflict Resolution: Case Studies from the European Periphery*, edited by Bruno Coppieters, Michael Emerson, Michel Huysseune, Tamara Kozviridze, Gergana Noutcheva, Nathalie Tocci, and Marius Vahl, 191–233. Gent: Academia Press.

Cornell, Svante E., ed. 2017. *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" and European Security*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Cortazzi, Martin. 2007. "Narrative Analysis in Ethnography." In *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland, and Lyn Lofland, 384–94. London: SAGE Publications.

Costello, Michael. 2015. "Law as Adjunct to Custom? Abkhaz Custom and Law in Today's State-Building and 'modernisation' - (Studied through Dispute Resolution)." PhD diss., University of Kent.

Dale, Catherine. 1997. "The Dynamics and Challenges of Ethnic Cleansing: The Georgia-Abkhazia Case." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 16 (3): 77–109.

Dbar, Sima A. 2000. *Obychai i Obriady Detskogo Tsikla u Abkhazov [Customs and Rituals of the Children's Cycle among the Abkhaz]*. Sukhum: Alashara.

Demmers, Jolle, and Mikel Venhovens. 2016. "Bluffing the State: Spatialities of Contested Statehood in the Abkhazian-Georgian Conflict." In *Spatializing*

Peace: Mapping the Production of Places, Sites and Scales of Violence, edited by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Annika Björkdahl, 159–77. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Douglas, Mary. 1967. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London, New York: Routledge.

Dubois de Montpéreux, Frédéric. 1937. *Puteshestvie Vokrug Kavaza [Journey around the Caucasus]*. Sukhumi: ABGIZ.

Dunn, Elizabeth Cullen, and Martin Demant Frederiksen. 2014. "Ethnographies of Absence in Contemporary Georgia: Introduction." *Slavic Review* 73 (2): 241–45.

Dzidzaria, Georgii. 1976. *F. F. Tornau i Ego Kavkazkie Materialy XIX Veka [F. F. Tornau and His 19th Century Caucasian Materials]*. Moscow: Nauka.

Eastmond, Marita, and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic. 2012. "Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life." *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6 (3): 502–24.

Edgar, Adrienne Lynn. 2007. "Marriage, Modernity, and the 'Friendship of Nations': Interethnic Intimacy in Post-War Central Asia in Comparative Perspective." *Central Asian Survey* 26 (4): 581–99.

Ekho Kavkaza. 2015. "ARUAA: Poezdka Grazhdan Abkhazii Na Futbol'nyi Match v Tbilisi - Verkh Tsinizma [The Trip of the Citizens of Abkhazia to the Football Match in Tbilisi Is the Height of Cynicism]." August 13, 2015. https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/27187131.html (accessed 23 July 2020).

Ethno-Kavkaz. n.d. "Naselenie Abkhazii [Population of Abkhazia]." http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html (accessed 16 August 2020).

Fearon, D, and David D Laitin. 2000. "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity." *International Organization* 54 (4): 845–77.

Feldman, Allen. 1991. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Figueiredo, Rui J.P. de, and Barry R. Weingast. 1999. "The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict." In *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, edited by Barbara F. Walter and Jack Snyder, 261–302. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fitzpatrick, Shelia. 2005. *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2015. *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia*. London, New York: I.B Tauris.

Foster, George M. 1965. "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good." *American Anthropologist* 67 (2): 293–315.

Fox, J. E., and C. Miller-Idriss. 2008. "Everyday Nationhood." *Ethnicities* 8 (4): 536–63.

Francis, Celine. 2011. *Conflict Resolution and Status: The Case of Georgia and Abkhazia (1989-2008)*. Brussels: VUB Press.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Garb, Paula. 1994. "Abkhazians: Growing in Age and Wisdom." In *Portraits of Culture: Ethnographic Originals*, edited by Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember, and David Levinson, 59–86. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

———. 1995. "The Return of Refugees Viewed through the Prism of Blood Revenge." *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* 13 (2): 41–44.

———. 2009. "The View from Abkhazia of South Ossetia Ablaze." *Central Asian Survey* 28 (2): 235–46.

Garb, Paula, and John M. Whiteley. 2001. "A Hydroelectric Power Complex on Both Sides of a War: Potential Weapon or Peace Incentive?" In *Reflections on Water: New Approaches to Transboundary Conflicts and Cooperation*, edited by Joachim Blatter and Helen Ingram, 213–38. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Gegeshidze, Archil, and Ivlian Haindrava. 2011. *Transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Rethinking the Paradigm*. London: Conciliation Resources.

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

German, Tracey. 2016. "Russia and South Ossetia: Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16 (1): 155–67.

Glebovski, Dmitri. 2019. "Abkhazia: 'war Trophy' Apartments – Will They Be Returned to Their Owners?" JAMnews. August 5, 2019. https://jam-news.net/abkhazia-war-trophy-apartments-will-they-be-returned-to-their-owners/ (accessed 23 August, 2019).

Glick, Peter. 2002. "Sacrificial Lambs Dressed in Wolves' Clothing: Envious Prejudice, Ideology, and the Scapegoating of Jews." In *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, edited by Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber, 113–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gluckman, Max. 1940. "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand." *Bantu Studies* 14 (1): 1–30.

Gogua, Nino. 2017. "Georgians in Gali — Foreigners in Their Own Land." OC Media. September 25, 2017. https://oc-media.org/georgians-in-gali-foreigners-in-their-own-land/ (accessed 16 August 2020).

Gorenburg, Dmitry. 2006a. "Rethinking Interethnic Marriage in the Soviet Union." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22 (2): 145–65.

———. 2006b. "Soviet Nationalities Policy and Assimilation." In *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, edited by Dominique Arel and Blair A. Ruble, 273–303. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Grono, Magdalena Frichova. 2011. *Displacement in Georgia: IDP Attitudes to Conflict, Return and Justice*. London: Conciliation Resources.

Gubrium, Jaber F., and James A. Holstein. 2008. "Narrative Ethnography." In *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, 241–64. New York: The Guilford Press.

Gulia, Dmitry. 2003. *Sochineniia [Essays]*. Sukhum: Alasharbaga.

Haas, Marcel de. 2010. *Russia's Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*. London: Routledge.

Halperin, Eran. 2016. *Emotions in Conflict: Inhibitors and Facilitators of Peace Making*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hammarberg, Thomas, and Magdalena Grono. 2017. *Human Rights in Abkhazia Today: Report*. Stockholm and Brussels.

Hanson, Rebecca, and Patricia Richards. 2019. *Harassed: Gender, Bodies and Ethnographic Research*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hayden, Robert M. 1996. "Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia Published." *American Ethnologist* 23 (4): 783–801.

Helms, Elissa. 2010. "The Gender of Coffee: Women and Reconciliation Initiatives in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Journal of Global and Historical*

Anthropology 2010 (57): 17–32.

Herzfeld, Michel. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hessick, Carissa Byrne. 2007. "Violence between Lovers, Strangers and Friends." *Washington University Law Review* 85 (2): 343–407.

Hewitt, George. 1993. "Abkhazia: A Problem of Identity and Ownership." *Central Asian Survey* 12 (3): 267–323.

———. 2013. *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*. Leiden: Brill.

Hirsch, Francine. 1997. "The Soviet Union as a Work-in-Progress: Ethnographers and the Category Nationality in the 1926, 1937, and 1939 Censuses." *Slavic Review* 56 (2): 251–78.

———. 2005. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric. J. 1992. *Nation and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hogg, Michael A., and Dominic Abrams. 1998. *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London, New York: Routledge.

Hogg, Michael A., Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White. 1995. "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology* 58 (4): 255–69.

Horowitz, Donald L. 1985. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press.

———. 2001. *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Berkley, London: University of California Press.

Hroch, Miroslav. 1985. *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hromadzic, Azra. 2013. "'Once We Had a House': Invisible Citizens and Consociational Democracy in Post-War Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Social Analysis* 56 (3): 30–48.

HRW. 1995. *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict*. Helsinki: Human Rights Watch Arms Project/Human Rights Watch.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2004. "Cosmopolitanism and Kosmopolitizm in the Political Life of Soviet Citizens." *Focaal* 44: 138–52.

Humphrey, Caroline, and Vera Skvirskaja. 2012. "Introduction." In *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities: Explorations of Urban Coexistence*, edited by Catherine Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja, 1–16. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

ICG. 2006. "Abkhazia Today." Europe Report No. 176.

———. 2009. "Georgia-Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous." Policy Briefing No. 53.

———. 2010. "Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence." Europe Report No. 202.

Inal-Ipa, Shalva. 1960. *Abkhazy: Istoriko-Etnograficheskiye Ocherki [Abkhazians: Historical-Ethnographic Essays]*. Sukhumi: Abgosizdat.

———. 1965. *Abkhazy (Istoriko-Etnograficheskie Ocherki) [The Abkhazians (Historical and Ethnographic Essays)]*. Sukhumi: Alashara.

———. 2010. *Abkhazian Etiquette*. Sukhum: Abkhazian State University.

Iskander, Fazil. 1983. *Sandro of Chegem*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Ivana Macek. 2009. *Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

JAMnews. 2016a. "Will Local Georgians Get New Abkhaz Passports?" January 4, 2016. https://jam-news.net/will-local-georgians-get-new-abkhaz-passports/ (accessed 16 August 2020).

———. 2016b. "Daite Ili Zakhvatim [Give It to Us, or We'll Grab It]." November 14, 2016. https://jam-news.net/ru/дайте-или-захватим/ (accessed 17 August 2020).

Jansen, Stef. 2010. "Of Wolves and Men: Postwar Reconciliation and the Gender of Inter-National Encounters." *Focaal* 2010 (57): 33–49.

———. 2015. *Yearnings in the Meantime: "Normal Lives" and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex. Yearnings in the Meantime: "Normal Lives" and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Jeska, Andrea. 2004. "Die Brücke Der Deutschen." *Eurasisches Magazin*, 2004.

Kabachnik, Peter. 2012. "Shaping Abkhazia: Cartographic Anxieties and the Making and Remaking of the Abkhazian Geobody." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 14 (4): 397–415.

Kabachnik, Peter, Joanna Regulska, and Beth Mitchneck. 2010. "Where and When Is Home? The Double Displacement of Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia." *Journal of*

Refugee Studies 23 (3): 315–36.

———. 2012. "Displacing Blame: Georgian Internally Displaced Person Perspectives of the Georgia–Abkhazia Conflict." *Ethnopolitics* 11 (2): 123–40.

Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2008. "Ethnic Defection in Civil War." *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (8): 1043–68.

Kaufman, Stuart J. 2001. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kaufmann, Chaim. 1996. "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars." *International Security* 20 (4): 136–75.

Kemoklidze, Nino. 2014. "Identity and Violence: Cases in Georgia." PhD diss., University of Birmingham.

———. 2016. "Georgian-Abkhaz Relations in the Post-Stalin Era." In *Georgia After Stalin*, edited by Timothy Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith, 129–45. London: Routledge.

Khashig, Inal. 2002. "Abkhaz Rush for Russian Passports." Institute for War & Peace Reporting. June 27, 2002. https://iwpr.net/global-voices/abkhaz-rush-russian-passports (accessed 16 August 2020).

———. 2008. "Abkhaz Open 'Second Front.'" Institute for War & Peace Reporting. August 17, 2008. https://iwpr.net/global-voices/abkhaz-open-second-front (accessed 16 August 2020).

Khlevniuk, Oleg V. 2015. "Kremlin – Tbilisi: Purges, Control and Georgian Nationalism in the First Half of the 1950s." In *Georgia After Stalin: Nationalism and Soviet Power*, edited by Timothy Blauvelt and Jeremy Smith, 13–31. London: Routledge.

Koenker, Diane P. 2013. *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Kolind, Torsten. 2007. "In Seach of 'Decent People': Resistance to Ethnicization of Everyday Life among the Muslims of Stolac." In *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, edited by Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms, and Ger Duijzings, 123–38. Aldershot: Ashgate.

———. 2008. *Post-War Identification: Everday Muslim Counterdiscourse in Bosnia Herzegovina*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Kolstø, Pål, and Helge Blakkisrud. 2013. "Yielding to the Sons of the Soil: Abkhazian Democracy and the Marginalization of the Armenian Vote." *Ethnic and Racial*

Studies 36 (12): 2075–95.

Kopeček, Vincenc, Tomás Hoch, and Vladimir Baar. 2016. "De Facto States and Democracy: The Case of Abkhazia." *Bulletin of Geography* 32: 85–104.

Korostelina, Karina. 2014. "Intergroup Identity Insults: A Social Identity Theory Perspective." *Identity* 14 (3): 214–29.

Krylov, Aleksandr. 2001. *Religiia i Traditsii Abkhazov [Religion and Traditions of the Abkhaz]*. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Kuzub, Mikhail V. 2015. "Armiane v Gruzino-Abkhazskom Konflikte [Armenians in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict]." *Sovremennaia Nauchnaia Mysl' [Modern Scientific Thought]* 2: 90–100.

Labadze, Mikheil. 2015. "The Tale of Afro-Abkhazians." Georgian Journal. 2015. https://www.georgianjournal.ge/discover-georgia/29876-the-tale-of-afro-abkhazians.html (accessed 12 August 2020).

Laitin, David D. 1995. "Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Nationality in the Post-Soviet Diaspora." *European Journal of Sociology European Journal of Sociology European Journal of Sociology* 36 (36): 281–316.

Lakoba, Stanislav. 1999. "History: 18th Century-1917." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt, 67–88. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Lederach, Jean Paul. 1997. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Lezhava, Grigorii. 1997. *Mezhdu Gruziei i Rossiei: Istoricheskie Korni i Sovremennye Faktory Abkhazo- Gruzinskogo Konflikta (XIX – XX vv) [Between Georgia and Russia: Historical Roots and Modern Factors of the Abkhaz-Georgian Conflict (XIX-XX Centuries)]*. Moscow: Centre of the Study of International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences.

Lundgren, Minna. 2015. "Crossing the Border – An Intergenerational Study of Belonging and Temporary Return among IDPs from Abkhazia." In *Security, Democracy and Development in the Southern Caucasus and the Black Sea Region*, edited by Ghia Nodia and Christoph H. Steefes, 229–48. Bern: Peter Lang.

———. 2018. "Riskscapes: Strategies and Practices Along the Georgian–Abkhazian Boundary Line and Inside Abkhazia." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 33 (637–654): 1–18.

Maan, Omar. 2012. *Apsuara v Sotsial'nykh Otnosheniiakh Abkhazov (XVIII - Pervaia Polovina XIX Veka) [Apsuara in the Social Relations of the Abkhazians (XVIII - First Half of the XIX Century)]*. Sukhum: Abkhazian Academy of Sciences.

Malkki, L. 1992. "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees." *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1): 24–44.

Malkki, Liisa H. 1995. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Marsden, Magnus, Diana Ibañez-Tirado, and David Henig. 2016. "Everyday Diplomacy." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34 (2): 2–22.

Marshania, Nato, Nona Tarbaia, and Maiia Kalandiia. 2006. "Zhenskie Sud'by [Women's Fates]." Open Society-Georgia Foundation.

Martin, Terry. 1998. "The Russification of the RSFSR." *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 39 (1–2): 99–117.

———. 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Marykhuba, Igor. 1993. *Ob Abkhazakh i Abkhazii (Istoricheskaia Spravka) [About the Abkhaz and Abkhazia (Historical Notes)]*. Sukhum.

———. , ed. 1994. *Abkhaziia v Sovetskuiu Epokhu. Abkhazskie Pis'ma (1947-1989). Sbornik Dokumentov [Abkhazia in the Soviet Era. Abkhazian Letters (1947-1989). Collection of Documents]*. Sukhum.

———. 1997. *Efrem Eshba – Vydaiushchiisia Gosudarstvennyi Deiatel' [Efrem Eshba - an Outstanding Statesman]*. Sukhum: Alashara.

———. 2000. *Ocherki Politicheskoi Istorii Abkhazii [Essays on the Political History of Abkhazia]*. Sukhum: Alashara.

Meleady, Rose, and Laura Forder. 2019. "When Contact Goes Wrong: Negative Intergroup Contact Promotes Generalized Outgroup Avoidance." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 22 (5): 688–707.

Menabde, Giorgi. 2015. "Why Are Ossetians and Abkhazians Coming to Georgia for Medical Treatment?" Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation. 2015. https://jamestown.org/program/why-are-ossetians-and-abkhazians-coming-to-georgia-for-medical-treatment/ (accessed 7 July 2020).

Molodikova, Irina, and Alan Watt. 2007. *Growing up in the North Caucasus: Society, Family, Religion and Education*. New York: Routledge.

Mühlfried, Florian. 2019. *Mistrust: A Global Perspective*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Müller, Daniel. 1999. "Demography: Ethno-Demographic History, 1886-1989." In *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, edited by George Hewitt, 219–39. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Natolochnaya, Olga V., Natal'ya V. Miku, Teimur E. Zulfugarzade, and Aude Médico. 2018. "Highland Schools in the Caucasus: Historical Background." *European Journal of Contemporary Education* 7 (3): 608–14.

Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2012. *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Nave, Ari. 2000. "Marriage and the Maintenance of Ethnic Group Boundaries: The Case of Mauritius." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2): 329–52.

Noack, Christian. 2006. "Coping with Tourism: Planned and 'Wild' Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast." In *Tourism: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, edited by Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, 281–385. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Nodia, Ghia. 1997. "Causes and Visions of Conflict in Abkhazia." *Berkely Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*, 1–61.

Nodia, Ghia, and Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach. 2006. *The Political Landscape of Georgia. Political Parties: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*. Utrecht: Eburon.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. 1997. *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Novyi Region. 2007. "Sergei Bagapsh 'Novomu Regionu': Moiia Zhena, Gruzinka, Eshche Bol'shii Separatist, Chem Iia [Sergei Bagapsh to 'New Region': My Wife Is Georgian and Even a Bigger Separatist than Myself"." Novyi Den'. July 31, 2007. https://newdaynews.ru/interview/131995.html (accessed 16 August 2020).

Ó Beacháin, Donnacha. 2015. "Elections without Recognition: Presidential and Parliamentary Contests in Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh." *Caucasus Survey* 1199 (November): 1–19.

Okamura, Jonathan Y. 1981. "Situational Ethnicity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 4 (4): 452–65.

Parkes, Peter. 2004. "Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (3): 587–615.

Paustovsky, Konstantin. 1969. *Southern Adventure*. London: Harvill Press.

Peinhopf, Andrea. 2020. "The Curse of Displacement: Local Narratives of Forced
    Expulsion and the Appropriation of Abandoned Property in Abkhazia."
    Nationalities Papers, 1–18.

Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2013. "Outline for an Ethnography of Doubt." In *Ethnographies
    of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*, edited by Mathijs
    Pelkmans, 1–42. London: I.B Tauris.

Petersen, Roger D. 2002. *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and
    Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge
    University Press.

Pine, Frances. 2002. "Dealing with Money: Zlotys, Dollars and Other Currencies in
    the Polish Highlands." In *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of
    Postsocialism*, edited by Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel, 75–97. Oxford,
    New York: Berg.

Ramanathapillai, Rajmohan. 2006. "The Politicizing of Trauma: A Case Study of Sri
    Lanka." *Peace and Conflict* 12 (1): 1–18.

Ries, Nancy. 1997. *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca
    and London: Cornell University Press.

Ring, Laura. A. 2006. *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building*.
    Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Sagaria, Badzhgur, Temur Achugba, and Valiko Pachulia. 1992. *Abkhaziia:
    Dokumenty Svidetel'stvuiut 1937-1953 [Abkhazia: Documents Bear Witness
    1937-1953]*. Sukhum: Alashara.

Sambanis, Nicholas, and Moses Shayo. 2013. "Social Identification and Ethnic
    Conflict." *American Political Science Review* 107 (2): 294–325.

Sanders, Todd, and Harry G. West. 2003. "Power Revealed and Concealed in the
    New World Order." In *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of
    Suspicion in the New World Order*, edited by Todd Sanders and Harry G. West,
    1–37. Durham, London: Duke University Press.

Schatz, Edward. 2009. "Introduction: Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of
    Politics." In *Politcal Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of
    Power*, edited by Edward Schatz, 1–22. Chicago and London: University of
    Chicago Press.

Sharia, Vitalii. 1993. *Abkhazkaia Tragediia [Abkhazian Tragedy]*. Sukhum.

———. 2014. "Pitsunda: Poteriannyi Rai? [Pitsunda: Lost Paradise?]." Ekho

Kavkaza. October 24, 2014. https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/26654628.html (accessed 13 May 2020).

———. 2017. "Kvartnirnii Vopros: Sukhumskie Kontrasti [Housing Questions: Sukhumi Contrasts]." Ekho Kavkaza. May 25, 2017. https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28509113.html (accessed 17 August 2020).

Shenfield, Stephen D. 2008. "Origins and Evolutions of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict." Abkhaz World. 2008. https://abkhazworld.com/aw/conflict/31-origins-and-evolutions-of-the-georgian-abkhaz-conflict (accessed 10 August 2020).

Shesterinina, Anastasia. 2014. "Mobilization in Civil War: Latent Norms, Social Relations, and Inter-Group Violence in Abkhazia." PhD diss., York University.

Shils, Edward. 1957. "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory." *The British Journal of Sociology* 8 (2): 130–45.

Shnirelman, Victor. 2001. *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

Sideri, Eleni. 2012. "'The Land of the Golden Fleece': Conflict and Heritage in Abkhazia." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 14 (2): 263–78.

Skvirskaja, Vera. 2010. "New Diaspora in a Post-Soviet City: Transformations in Experiences of Belonging in Odesa, Ukraine." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 10 (1): 76–91.

Slezkine, Yuri. 1994. "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism." *Slavic Review* 53 (2): 414–52.

Slider, Darrell. 1985. "Crisis and Response in Soviet Nationality Policy: The Case of Abkhazia." *Central Asian Survey* 4 (4): 51–68.

Smith, Anthony D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.

———. 2009. *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. London, New York: Routledge.

———. 2015. "Ethnosymbolism." In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Sorabji, Cornelia. 1995. "A Very Modern War: Terror and Territory in Bosnia-Hercegovina." In *War: A Cruel Necessity? The Bases of Institutionalized Violence*,

edited by Robert A. Hinde and Helen E. Watson, 80–95. London, New York: I.B Tauris.

Souleimanov, Emil Aslan, and Huseyn Aliyev. 2015. "Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization: Evidence from the Chechen Wars." *International Security* 40 (2): 158–80.

Stefansson, Anders H. 2006. "Homes in the Making: Property Restitution, Refugee Return, and Senses of Belonging in a Post-War Bosnian Town." *International Migration* 44 (3): 115–39.

———. 2010. "Coffee after Cleansing? Co-Existence, Co-Operation, and Communication in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Focaal* 2010 (57): 62–76.

Straus, Scott. 2006. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Studio Re. 2004. "Abkhazia: One Side of a Conflict [Documentary]." 2004. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_cxejUjAwo (accessed 16 August 2020).

———. 2009. "Absence of Will [Documentary]." Georgia. 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X20rok7Gil0 (accessed 27 May 2020).

Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1993. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

———. 2014. "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations." *The Journal of Modern History* 73 (4): 862–96.

Susokolov, Aleksandr. 1987. *Mezhnatsional'nye Braki v SSSR [Interethnic Marriages in the USSR]*. Moscow: Mysl'.

Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1986. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour." In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, 7–24. Chicago: Nelson Hall.

Taklama. 2011. "A First Look at Abkhazia's Census Results." 2011. https://web.archive.org/web/20160401035139/https://taklama.com/2011/12/29/a-first-look-at-abkhazias-census-results/.

Tarba, Sima Z. 2008. "Magiia i Magicheskie Obriady Abkhazov [Magic and Magical Rituals of the Abkhaz]." Acadamy of Sciences of Abkhazia, D. Gulia Institute for Research and the Study of Humanities.

Telekompaniia Abaza TV. 2016. "Biograficheskii Salon - Sergei Matosian [Biographical Salon - Sergei Matosian]." YouTube. 2016.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4-ByZJ9sps&list=PL9v-zrfsqdz0bJhyOexaqZ1xGasg-ZA-j&index=6&t=524s (accessed 16 August 2020).

———. 2017a. "Biograficheskii Salon - Pola Garb [Biographical Salon - Paula Garb]." 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxbm1uiEvhM (accessed 19 May 2020).

———. 2017b. "Biograficheskii Salon - Rusiko Marshania [Biographical Salon - Rusiko Marshania]." 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czqvWILRccw (accessed 26 August 2020).

The Economist. 2002. "Smiles All Round – till the next Time," October 12, 2002.

Ther, Philipp. 2012. "Ethnic Cleansing." In *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, edited by Dan Stone, 1–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, Andrew. 2001. "Nations, National Identities and Human Agency: Putting People Back into Nations." *The Sociological Review* 49 (1): 18–32.

Tishkov, Valery. 1995. "'Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!': An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 32 (2): 133–49.

———. 1997. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. London: SAGE.

Toal, Gerard, and Carl T. Dahlman. 2011. *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and Its Reversal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Toal, Gerard, and Magdalena Frichova Grono. 2011. "After Ethnic Violence in the Caucasus: Attitudes of Local Abkhazians and Displaced Georgians in 2010." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52 (5): 655–78.

Topch'ian, Marieta. 2015. "Armiane Abkhazii." Abkhaziia-Inform. April 24, 2015. http://www.abkhazinform.com/tochka-zreniya/item/971-armyane-abkhazii (accessed 16 August 2020).

Toria, Malkhaz. 2015. "Remembering Homeland In Exile: Recollections of IDPs from the Abkhazia Region of Georgia." *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 14 (1): 48–70.

Toria, Malkhaz, Nino Pirtskhalava, Elene Kekelia, and Konstantine Ladaria. 2019. "Trapped in the Past: Memories of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons on the Margins of Society." *Nationalities Papers* 47 (3): 429–44.

Trier, Tom, Hedvig Lohm, and David Szakonyi. 2010. *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*. London: Hurst.

Tsintsadze, Giorgi. 2017. "Taking the UEFA Super Cup to the Barracides in Georgia." These Football Times. May 16, 2017. https://thesefootballtimes.co/2017/05/16/taking-the-uefa-super-cup-to-the-barricades-in-georgia/ (accessed 23 July 2020).

United Nations. 1993. "Report of the Secretary-General's Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in Abkhazia, Republic of Georgia." S/26795.

———. 1994. "Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992)."

United States Department of State. 1994. "U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 1993 - Georgia." 1994. https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6aa508.html (accessed 23 August, 2019).

Utekhin, Ilya. 2018. "Suspicion and Mistrust in Neighbour Relations: A Legacy of the Soviet Mentality?" In *Mistrust: Ethnographic Approximations*, edited by Florian Mühlfried, 201–17. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Vakhtang. 2017. "Mistika v Trofeinom Dome [Supernatural Phenomena in the Trophy House] [Video File]." 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1drfPpmy4jI (accessed 23 August 2019).

Voitsekhovskii, Boris. 2017. "Sukhum - Zhivoi [Sukhum – Alive]." Sputnik Abkhazia. March 24, 2017. https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20170324/1020629429/zhivoj-suxum.html (accessed 29 August, 2019).

Voronov, Yuri, Pavel Florenskii, and Tat'iana Shutova. 1993. *Belaia Kniga Abkhazii. Dokumenty, Materialy, Svidetel'stva. 1992-1993 [White Book of Abkhazia. Documents, Materials, Evidences. 1992-1993]*. Moscow.

Waal, Thomas De. 2018. *Uncertain Ground: Engaging With Europe's De Facto States and Breakaway Territories*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

———. 2019. "The Strange Normality of Life in a Breakaway State." BBC News. January 11, 2019. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-46510917 (accessed 9 June 2020).

Welt, Cory. 2014. "A Fateful Moment: Ethnic Autonomy and Revolutionary Violence in the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-21)." In *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian Republic and Its Successors*, edited by Stephen F. Jones, 205–31. New York: Routledge.

Wikipedia. 2019. "Marshania, Lorik Vissarionovich." 2019. https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Маршания,_Лорик_Виссарионович (accessed 16 August 2020).

Wimmer, Andreas. 2013. *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wodak, Ruth, Rudolf De Cillia, Martin Reisigl, and Karin Liebhart. 2009. *The Discursive Construction of National Identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Wohl, Michael J. A., and Nyla R. Branscombe. 2009. "Group Threat, Collective Angst, and Ingroup Forgiveness for the War in Iraq." *Political Psychology* 30 (2): 193–217.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2008. "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks." *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (1): 539–61.

Zemskov-Züge, Andrea. 2015. "History Dialogue between Georgians and Abkhaz: How Can Working with the Past Pave New Ways?" *Politorbis Nr. 60* 60 (2): 23–30.

———. 2016. "Dealing with the Past in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: The Power of Narratives, Spaces and Rituals." In *Transforming War-Related Identities: Individual and Social Approaches to Healing and Dealing with the Past*, edited by Beatrix Austin and Martina Fischer, 51–58. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

Zhemukhov, Sufian. 2012. "Does Abkhazia Need a Foreign Policy Makeover?" OpenDemocracy Russia. 2012. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/does-abkhazia-need-foreign-policy-makeover/ (accessed 16 August 2020).

Zürcher, Christoph. 2007. *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York: New York University Press.