The curse of displacement: Local narratives of forced expulsion and the appropriation of abandoned property in Abkhazia

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Abstract. Since the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, the often-precarious status of the Georgians displaced from Abkhazia has received significant academic attention. In contrast, the consequences of displacement from the reverse perspective – how it has affected the people who stayed behind – remains underanalysed. Drawing on narratives collected during several months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper argues that although ethnic Abkhazians see themselves as victims of ethnic violence rather than perpetrators, the re-distribution of Georgian property nevertheless caused significant distress. Many condemned the practice of appropriation, suggesting that taking what is not one’s own is not only a violation of the property of the original owner, but also of the Abkhaz moral code and therefore shameful. To them, 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. However, while the stories around the trophy houses reflect substantial intra-communal divisions, I suggest that they are also an expression of a shared post-war experience. Like the horror stories of Georgian violence, and those of Abkhaz heroism, they have become part of an intimate national repertoire constitutive of Abkhazia’s post-war community.

Keywords: forced displacement; ethnic cleansing; narratives; victimhood; Abkhazia

Introduction

At the end of the 14-month long Georgian-Abkhaz war in September 1993, which resulted in the victory of the pro-Abkhaz forces, around 200,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced and forced to resettle to areas outside of Abkhazia, such as the Samegrelo region in Western Georgia and the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.1 Understandably, the plight of the refugees or so-called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the majority of whom have not been able to return, has received much academic attention.2 Existing studies have highlighted the displaced peoples’ continued sense of belonging to Abkhazia as their homeland, sometimes even across generations, and their devotion to the idea of an eventual return (e.g. Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010; Grono 2011; Kabachnik 2012; Lundgren 2015).
The scholarship on the post-war developments within Abkhazia, on the other hand, has mostly looked at the re-making of the political landscape, focusing in particular on de facto state-building and democratization (e.g. Berg and Mölder 2012; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012). There have also been studies on inter-ethnic relations and minority rights in contemporary Abkhazia (e.g. Clogg 2008; Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010), as well as a number of publications on the political economy of conflict protraction (e.g. Prelz Oltramonti 2015a, 2015b). However, while this literature helps to understand what there was to be gained politically and economically from the perspective of the de facto authorities, it rarely addresses how ordinary people experienced mass expulsion and its aftermath.3

This paper therefore takes a different approach and explores the aftermath of ethnic violence in connection with mass displacement from the perspective of those who stayed behind, i.e. the ethnic Abkhazians4 who took over evacuated property. How have they come to terms with the disappearance of a large part of the pre-war population? In other words, how have ordinary Abkhaz people coped with the violence that has been inflicted on the out-group? Research in social psychology suggests that instead of acknowledgment and guilt, denial is a common reaction to atrocities committed by the in-group (Cohen 2001). According to Bandura (1999), perpetrators tend to use various moral disengagement strategies, such as moral justification and dehumanization, to cognitively restructure the harmful conduct into an acceptable one. What strategies of moral disengagement can we find in Abkhazia? And to what extent can we also find moments of moral re-engagement? As Brubaker (2004), among others, has argued, war and violent conflict tend to result in group crystallization and maximum ethnic antagonism. But what happens after the polarizing “event” of war is over and the euphoria about one’s victory begins to fade? In the case of Abkhazia, the end of the war did not coincide with a settlement. Unlike in post-conflict societies, where an official peace deal has been made, people living in protracted, intractable conflict can never quite afford to “move on” and “forget,” as the conflict continues to provide the background against which their lives are organized.5 To what extent did doubts about the rightfulness of what happened surface?

To capture the “cycles of hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment” (Pelkmans 2013, 3) characteristic of the human experience, the project takes a distinct ethnographic approach aimed at gleaning “the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009, 5). As anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans (2013, 5) has noted, 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 particularly suited for “catching doubt in midair.” The data was therefore
collected 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. To
understand how ordinary people have been making sense of war and displacement, I was
particularly interested in the collective narratives that ethnic Abkhazians employ when talking
about the violent events of the early 90s. Rather than mere representations of past events (“what
really happened”), narratives are “social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of
historical and current events; they are accounts of a community’s collective experiences,
embodied in its belief system and represent the collective’s symbolically constructed shared
identity” (Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006, 20). They “address issues not only about what happened
but also about why it happened and who or what was responsible” (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014, 29).

Even though, as a Western foreigner, I was exposed to significant levels of mistrust due
to the West’s unwillingness to recognize Abkhazia’s independence, 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.

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. 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 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. 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.”

Throughout this article, I quote from informal conversations written down post factum
and – to a lesser extent – from taped interviews. The data analysis proceeded in two steps:
First, I identified recurring statements and themes through thematic analysis. Drawing on
ethnographic approaches to narrative analysis (see Cortazzi 2001; Gubrium and Holstein
2008), I then analyzed 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). To contextualize the data collected during participant observation, I also used written sources, including contemporaneous and more recent accounts of the war by both local and international observers, as well as a performance by a group of Abkhaz comedians that was recorded and posted on YouTube and provides some insight into the larger societal relevance of the issue.

I begin this article by providing a brief overview of the dynamics of violence during the war based on data collected by international observers. Drawing on my own material, I then present the main narratives that my contacts employed to make sense of the war and justify the violence that was committed. I identify four dominant narratives which all follow a common logic of collective victimhood, according to which displacement is regarded as a something that the Georgians brought upon themselves, making the Abkhaz the “true” victim of the conflict. Next, I explore how victimization is challenged by looking at the moral discourse surrounding the so-called “trophy houses,” i.e. 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 analyze how my informants made sense of this counter-discourse and whether it has the potential to undermine the narrative of victimization 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.

The dynamics of violence

In order to understand how ethnic Abkhazians have made sense of the mass displacement of people they used to live amongst, it is important not to look at the displacement as an isolated event and instead pay attention to the larger dynamics of violence that unfolded during the war. Reports by international observers attest to a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence characteristic of many conflicts across regions. When the Georgian troops, consisting of the paramilitary National Guard and Mkhedrioni (“Knights”), entered Abkhazia in August 1992, a wave of violence directed against mostly ethnic Abkhazians caused many to flee the areas under Georgian control (United Nations 1993, para. 11; HRW 1995, 21). The majority of Sukhumi’s Abkhaz residents fled the city over the course of a few weeks, seeking refuge in Abkhaz-dominated territory in and around the town of Gudauta. From there, Abkhaz began to
counter-mobilize with the help of volunteer fighters from outside the region, mostly the northern Caucasus but also Turkey, which is home to a large Abkhaz diaspora. At the beginning of October, they were able to take control of Gagra, causing the flight of thousands of local Georgians in response to atrocities committed against Georgians (United Nations 1993, para. 18; HRW 1995, 26).

Over the course of the first half of 1993, the Abkhaz forces organized several major but unsuccessful attacks on Sukhumi. At the end of July, the conflicting parties agreed to a ceasefire; it obliged both sides to withdraw heavy weapons from Sukhumi but was later broken by Abkhaz forces (HRW 1995, 41). On September 27, the region’s capital came under Abkhaz control, causing the retreat of the Georgian troops from Abkhazia. As the UN Security Council (1993, para. 35) reported, “[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.” Officials of the Georgian government estimated that over 250,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia – a number that has been contested by Abkhazian authorities (Dale 1997, 83).

Although the defeat of the Georgian troops and the flight of the majority of the Georgian population brought the war to an end, as neither the Georgian government nor the international community recognized the Abkhaz victory as legitimate but, instead, continued to insist on the return of the displaced, the conflict has remained unresolved. While their houses and apartments were usually either destroyed or appropriated by Abkhaz and members of other nationalities, many of those who were displaced still regard Abkhazia as their homeland, hoping to return eventually (e.g. Toria et al. 2019).

“We are the victims here:” Strategies of moral disengagement

As social psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal (2000, 352) noted in his work on the psychological foundations of protracted conflict, more than in any other situation, people who are confronted with war engage in cognitive activities that help them to understand what is happening: “First, they strive to explain the conflict situation, which often causes stress and uncertainty. They try to find answers to such questions as why the conflict erupted, which side is responsible for its outbreak, what are the intentions of the adversary group members, and so on.” These attempts to make sense of war and violence lead to the emergence of certain collective narratives – or stories – that help give meaning to events that were experienced as deeply disruptive.
When ethnic Abkhazians speak about the war, they usually refer to the Georgian aggression they experienced, in particular at the earlier stages of the conflict. As social psychologists have noted, a sense of victimization or collective victimhood – whereby each party sees itself as the exclusive victim, despite the existence of evidence contradicting this – is a common phenomenon across conflicts (e.g. Noor et al. 2012; Vollhardt 2012). It allows those concerned to morally disengage from the atrocities committed by the in-group. According to social identity theory, people seek to maintain a positive image of the groups they identify with and that therefore form an important part of their identities as individuals (Tajfel and Turner 1986). While grounded in real, traumatic events, seeing one’s own group as the victim helps to maintain a positive image as a member of the group and enables people to regard counter-action through the prism of defense (Bar-Tal 2013).

Based on my field notes, I identify four recurring narratives that my contacts drew upon when talking about the atrocities that happened: war, ethno-nationalism or nativism, betrayal and, finally, revenge. All four narratives are interrelated and can be subsumed under a larger discourse of collective victimhood, according to which displacement is seen as an inevitable result of Georgian aggression.

The narrative of war

While accounts of mass atrocities often focus on the role of nationalist ideologies or grievances as key mobilizing factors, there is also an important interrelation between warfare and ethnic violence (see, e.g., Straus 2006). Many of my interlocutors stressed that the events on August 14 unfolded in accordance with a military logic of defense: The Georgians attacked and the Abkhaz counter-mobilized in order to defend their state, their villages and their families. When I asked 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.”

According to the narrative of war, the Georgian side lost in a battle that it had itself provoked and the consequences of which it has been refusing to face ever since the Abkhaz victory. Separation in the form of the expulsion of the “hostile” Georgian population and independent state-building are seen as a legitimate response to this refusal, as it is the only way to prevent more violence. In line with this thinking, it is their own government, not the Abkhaz administration or their Russian patron, which those on the Georgian side should blame for their loss.
The ethno-nationalist or nativist narrative

Even though Abkhazia had been an autonomous republic (ASSR) within Soviet Georgia, by the time the Soviet Union collapsed and the war broke out, there was a widespread understanding among the Abkhaz community that Abkhazia was their exclusive homeland (see Shesterinina 2014), a perception that had long been cultivated by the Soviet territorialization of national identity through homeland republics (Kaiser 1994). The notion of the exclusive homeland owned by the titular nation played an important role in how people made sense of the Abkhaz counter-mobilization. For instance, my contacts typically conceptualized the two conflicting parties as neighbors. As one male interlocutor in his early 40s told me: “Imagine that your neighbor comes to your house and says: ‘This is mine now!’ How would you react? Surely you wouldn’t let somebody take what is yours.”

Instances of violence were hence quickly framed as heroic acts of the liberation of one’s land (zemlia) or homeland (rodina) from alien intruders whose aim was not just to “take” Abkhazia, but to annihilate the Abkhaz people. A hostile, anti-Abkhaz rhetoric by leaders of the Georgian national movement during the perestroika years had already exacerbated fears of extinction among the Abkhaz population, and when the war broke out, it increasingly came to be understood as an attempt to cleanse the land of ethnic Abkhazians. Many of my informants cited statements made by Georgian officials as examples, such as the public warning by Georgian commander-in-chief Giorgi Karkarashvili that if 100,000 Georgians lost their lives, all 97,000 Abkhazians would be killed, leaving the Abkhaz nation without descendants (see Circassianworld 2008). They also often referred to the destruction of the state historical archive of Abkhazia and the archive of the Institute of Abkhaz Language, History and Literature in October 1992 as another proof for Georgia’s genocidal intent.

While remarks like “they thought they could get rid of us and that would solve the problem” or “they were promised an Abkhazia without Abkhaz” were frequent during my fieldwork, the expulsion of the local Georgians, on the other hand, was not seen as a form of ethnic cleansing. As Georgian historians attempted to portray the Abkhaz as “immigrants” from the North Caucasus, Abkhaz intellectuals reacted by stressing the historical roots of the local Georgians in Western Georgia, thereby denying any historical attachment of the Georgian population to the Abkhazian territory. For them, it was the Georgians, and in particular the Mingrelians, who had taken over their land after large numbers of ethnic Abkhazians and related groups had been exiled to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century,
which left large parts of Abkhazia depopulated. As a consequence, they increasingly understood the expulsion of the Georgian population not as a departure from but a return to their homeland. As one of my contacts who fought in the war explained to me: “We did not kick anyone out. Everyone went where they belonged.”

**The narrative of betrayal**

Despite the surge in ethnic antagonism, ethno-nationalism and nativism were not the only prisms through which people made sense of what was happening around them. While the ethnic Abkhazians I spoke to unequivocally saw Abkhazia as their exclusive homeland, given that by 1989 45.7% of the inhabitants were Georgian, many ethnic Abkhazians had grown up in mixed neighborhoods and it was therefore widely acknowledged that a local community had existed before the war that was cross-ethnic or, as my contacts put it, “international” (internatsional’nyi). Consequently, a frequent distinction was made between “local Georgians,” on the one hand, and those from outside of Abkhazia who lacked familiarity with Abkhazia’s vernacular culture, on the other. Many interlocutors stressed that relations only turned sour when the local Georgians came under the increasing influence of the propaganda of the Georgian nationalist movement and chose to support the troops that entered Abkhazia instead of the Abkhaz neighbors they had grown up with.

According to the logic of betrayal, then, Georgians first and foremost had to go not because they lacked historical roots in Abkhazia, but because they turned their back on the local community of which they had been a part. By supporting the Georgian troops that entered Abkhazia and committed large-scale violence against ethnic Abkhazians, they forfeited their claim to membership in the multinational community they were once part of. 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 neighbors, which demonstrates that not all cross-ethnic ties that existed before the war were automatically suspended. However, having failed to mobilize 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 neighbors live in peace, we don’t want you here!!!’” In their understanding, it was again the Georgians who brought about their own suffering, either through action (fighting) or inaction (failing to protest).
The narrative of justified revenge

When asked about the atrocities committed against Georgians after the Abkhazian victory, one of my key informants explained:

Those who committed atrocities were people who had been brutalized (zverevshie). I knew a man whose daughter, son-in-law and grandchild were killed by Georgians coming into their house. [...] Now imagine what the brother would do if he had the 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. [...] You know, there are cases when somebody does something to you and that gives you a reason (povod) to get back at them. They did, in fact, give us a reason.

This statement provides an important glimpse into the vicious circle of bloodshed, pointing to the prior experience of violence – especially of people that are close, such as family members – as a key factor in the formation of a desire for vengeance that triggers a process of antagonistic collective categorization where “a whole category of people is blamed for the actions of one or a few” (Straus 2006, 165). While revenge plays a role in many conflicts regardless of the cultural context, vengeance was potentially more powerful in a society like Abkhazia, where it has been embedded in the culture through the custom of blood revenge for centuries and is therefore not, in principle, regarded as transgressive. 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 dishonorable (see Inal-Ipa 1960); as anthropologist Sula Benet (Benet 1974, 65) noted, “[n]ot to take vengeance is the greatest disgrace conceivable.”

Viewed from the perspective of blood revenge, the displacement of the local Georgians can thus be seen as an appropriate response to earlier atrocities committed against Abkhazians, and therefore as a form of retributive justice. Although traditionally an intra-group phenomenon, anecdotal evidence indicates that the custom of blood revenge played a role in the way that the Georgian refugees were treated and how this was looked upon by others. After her first trip to post-war Abkhazia in 1994, anthropologist Paula Garb (1995, 43) reported: “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. This can happen after any war, but in Abkhazian culture it is perceived through the prism of the rules of blood revenge and therefore condoned, or at least, not condemned.”
Unsurprisingly, the narrative of justified revenge rarely features in public accounts, most likely because of the possible harm that it would do to Abkhazia’s international reputation, but also because it could suggest that Abkhaz fighters might have been driven by personal motives rather than national heroism. Similarly, even though the narrative of betrayal invokes a notion of collective blame based on the failure of local Georgians to mobilize against the Georgian troops, it does not deny the previous proximity that existed between many local Georgians and ethnic Abkhazians, and in doing so differs from – and potentially challenges – public accounts that stress the ancient divisions between the Georgians and Abkhaz. However, despite certain differences, what all four narratives have in common is the fundamental idea that mass displacement was a justified punitive response to violence and violations committed by the Georgian troops and their local supporters. As the narrative analysis reveals, blame for the atrocities – committed against ethnic Abkhazians by Georgians and vice-versa – is exclusively attributed to the Georgians, who are perceived to be responsible not only for the suffering of the Abkhaz, but also their own.

Hence, whereas the international community and the Georgian government saw those displaced persecuted by ruthless separatists supported by Russia and demanded their immediate safe return, the dominant frame among ethnic Abkhazians was that, having not only politically supported the violence against the Abkhaz population but also taken an active part in its execution, Georgians were the perpetrators.21 That the international community would side with the perpetrators (supporting Abkhazia’s re-integration into Georgia and the return of those who were expelled) and punish the victims by isolating and not recognizing Abkhazia’s independence consequently seemed beyond comprehension to many.

**Limits of victimhood: the Georgian “trophy house”**

When the Georgians fled they had to evacuate their properties, and although some of their dwellings were burnt down, often with only the staircase left standing, others remained intact.22 Known as “trophy houses” (trofeiney doma), or “trophy flats” (trofeiney kvartiry), they were appropriated by ethnic Abkhazians as a reward for defeating the enemy. 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 reorganized:
Housing, land, and valuables are stolen from victims. Businesses and factory jobs are suddenly vacated and available to those who want to 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. 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:

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 irud); 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 in many ways. 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. 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 became regarded as “unfortunate“ (neschastnyi) and was shunned not only by the family concerned but everyone in the neighborhood.

While I was not able to establish the extent to which these magical rituals had actually been exercised, 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. Like Rebecca Bryant (2014, 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.

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, stressing that “this is not the way we do it (po-nashenski),” or “this is not in accordance with our principles (poniatiiia).” 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 (Inal-Ipa 1960; Benet 1974). This is well illustrated in one of the short stories by the famous 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 realizes 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 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 did engage 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.

*The “new Abkhazians:” 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 characterized by a sense of double victimization. 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 center 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 redistribution of these 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 with the treatment of Georgians were often overshadowed by a preoccupation with one’s own perceived marginalized 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 (now named Tkuarchal by the Abkhaz but still widely referred to as 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 Sukhum and provide for his family. Looking at the relatively well-maintained apartment block, 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 later turns out – 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, 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 realizes
that it is in fact a death spell, he awakes and jumps up in panic.

The performance, which was videotaped and uploaded onto YouTube in 2017, caused
much outrage among Georgians, who saw it as a confirmation of Abkhaz “ruthlessness” and
“moral decline.”26 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 ‘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 sympathize 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 known for their lavish lifestyle, in Abkhazia war and displacement produced a class
of so-called “new Abkhaz” (novye abkhaztsy), who – together with their expensive cars – came
to symbolize the emergence of an unprecedented, overt materialism at the expense of the
traditional Abkhaz values of modesty, humility and self-restraint.

That the “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 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.

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 fulfills 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” other than 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 killed. […] But I don’t judge those people who moved into abandoned houses; they needed a place to stay.”

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 marginalized 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, what we can see here is how 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 behavior appeared only to confirm existing prejudice, ethnic Abkhazians were seen as corrupted by circumstances but fundamentally good. Negative experiences were rationalized 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 understand
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 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.28 Although
the laments presented the occupation of Georgian homes as a threat to and the opposite of what
constitutes 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” (Herzfeld 2005, 6) that constitutes the core of cultural intimacy
and is always also affectionate, causing both embarrassment (“look at how greedy we’ve
become!”) and secret pride (“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.

Conclusion
The narratives presented in this article reveal that in contrast to the international community
and the Georgian government, which see the ethnic Abkhazians as primarily perpetrators and
Georgians as victims of ethnic cleansing, ethnic Abkhazians themselves hold the opposite
view. According to my interlocutors’ statements, the Abkhaz community, and not the
Georgian, was the ultimate victim in the conflict. In addition to a more abstract claim to
national self-determination grounded in the conception of Abkhazia as the exclusive homeland
of the Abkhaz, mass displacement was seen as a justified punishment for earlier atrocities
committed against the Abkhaz population by the Georgian troops, which ultimately made
peaceful co-existence inconceivable. From this perspective, the violence thus followed a logic
of self-defense, which did not only warrant the expulsion of the Georgian population, but also
a remedial right to secession.

This construction of collective victimhood allowed actors to displace responsibility for
any of the negative events that happened to the local Georgian population. Consequently, none
of my interlocutors overtly expressed sentiments of guilt or remorse in relation to the expulsion.
And yet, while the paper 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 cultural
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 the article illustrates, 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.29

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 position
within a new, emerging order that was perceived as highly arbitrary. Consequently,
displacement did 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 victimization, 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-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 marginalization. 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.

The article 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 paper illustrates, the prolonged, informal engagement with non-elite actors through participant observation, although time-consuming, is particularly suited to achieving these goals.

Notes

1 The exact number of displaced people from Abkhazia is disputed (see ICG 2007, 18–19).
2 The term “refugees,” which implies the crossing of state borders, is used in Abkhazia, whereas the Georgian government prefers the term “internally displaced persons,” which highlights Abkhazia’s status as an integral part of Georgia.
3 An exception is Paula Garb’s study of the role of blood revenge for the return of refugees (Garb 1995) as well as Gerard Toal and Magdalena Frichova Grono’s article on the Abkhazians’ attitudes towards return based on survey data (Toal and Grono 2011). Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck (2012) have touched upon the issue of how Abkhazians attribute blame but did not provide in-depth empirical evidence. Catherine Dale (1997) has written a very nuanced analysis of the dynamics of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s.
4 I use the terms “Abkhaz” (singular and plural) and “ethnic Abkhazian(s)” to refer to 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.
5 Protracted, intractable conflicts are broadly understood as conflicts that are in stalemate (see Coleman 2014). While peace agreements do not automatically resolve all tension even in so-called “post-conflict” societies, their absence contributes to a particularly pervasive culture of conflict (see Bar-Tal 2013, 270–74).
6 Place names in Abkhazia 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.
7 Because the research was conducted in Russian, I refer to original terms in Russian rather than Abkhaz. Most Abkhaz are fluent in Russian, which is still the dominant language in public affairs in Abkhazia.
8 After receiving initial support from civil society activists, I met most of my key informants by chance.
9 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.”
10 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 used in the article are pseudonyms.
11 This section focuses on the events during the war. For a long-term account of the conflict, see, e.g., Kaufman (2001), Coppiti (2004), Zürcher (2007) and Hewitt (2013).
12 Members of all nationalities became targets of looting and assault to some degree, including local Georgians.
13 An estimated 40,000 to 50,000 informally returned to the Gali district, which was predominantly Georgian before the war, in the mid-1990s (Amnesty International 2010, 11).
14 For a detailed discussion of the psychological mechanisms underlying collective (competitive) victimhood, see Noor et al. (2012).
15 The readiness to defend was heightened by a long history and culture of armed resistance, or what Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba (1999, 85) has called “the psychology of a warrior people.” As Abkhaz anthropologist Shalva Inal-Ipa (2010, 12) noted, due to a constant fear of being attacked, “Abkhazians never left home without weapons.”
16 It is a common argument in Abkhazia that a mass return of the displaced is likely to trigger renewed conflict.
17 For a detailed discussion of the role of historians and historiography in the conflict, see Shnirelman (2001); Coppiti (2002); Kemoklidze (2016).
18 Mingrelians have been defined as a Georgian “sub-group” or “sub-ethnos” from the Samegrelo region adjacent to Abkhazia (see Broers 2012). A large proportion of the Georgians who lived in Abkhazia were Mingrelians.
19 For a detailed discussion of the forced exile of the local Abkhaz population (known as mukhajirstvo), see Lakoba (1999). For an analysis of the resettlement of Mingrelians to Abkhazia under Stalin, see Blauvelt (2007).
20 Both HRW (1995, 5) and the UN fact-finding mission (1993, para. 53) collected testimonies of numerous cases of inter-ethnic rescue.
21 According to Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck (2012), the displaced tend to attribute blame primarily to Russia.
22 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 it (see, e.g., Glebovski 2019).
23 Toal and Frichtova 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.”
24 Bryant (2014, 687) similarly observes that some Turkish Cypriots refused to loot because they feared that the objects could bring a curse.
25 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.
26 See Vakhtang (2017) for comments on YouTube.
27 Navaro-Yashin (2012, 156) observed a similar distinction between those who occupied Greek property out of need (e.g. refugees from the south who had lost their own property) and those who looted to acquire wealth among Turkish Cypriots.
28 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.
29 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.”

References

Amnesty International. 2010. In the Waiting Room: Internally Displaced People in Georgia.


