

THE 1992-93 GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA WAR: A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

Alexandros Petersen*

Abstract

The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War, in which ethnic Abkhazians effectively extracted northwestern Georgia from Tbilisi's control, is a conflict largely forgotten in the West, despite its high profile re-ignition in August 2008. Historical arguments can be made both for Abkhazia's unity and autonomy from Georgia, but the conflict cannot be solely blamed on Soviet 'ethno-federalism'. It must, however, be understood within the context of Georgian independence. Ethnic tension between Abkhazians and Georgians was a necessary but not sufficient cause for the conflict. It took an unstable transition in Moscow, and chaotic Russian involvement in the run-up to the conflict, to turn tension into violence. Russia's one-sided role in ending hostilities meant that the conflict's causal issues were left frozen, only to be violently thawed fifteen years later.

Keywords: Georgia, Abkhazia, Russia, ethnic conflict, Caucasus

Introduction

As one of many conflicts precipitated by the breakup of the Soviet Union, the 1992-93 conflict between Georgia and the region of Abkhazia distinguishes itself as one of the bloodiest, most consequential and most unresolved. It caused tens of thousands of casualties and led to the displacement of about 250,000 people.¹ It is a dispute that persisted without major incident as a 'frozen conflict' until 2008, when large-scale Russian military intervention across Georgia re-ignited hostilities and led to Moscow's unilateral recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state.

The following article posits that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War is what can be termed as a 'forgotten conflict'. Therefore, the paper will attempt to explain the context surrounding the war, explore the dynamics of the politics and the 'fighting' of the conflict

***Alexandros Petersen** is Southeast Europe Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Adjunct Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. He concurrently serves as Senior Associate Scholar with the Center for European Policy Analysis.

¹ Antonenko, Oksana, "Frozen Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia", in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds.), "Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution" (London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 205

by looking at the roles of the three main groups involved: Georgians, Abkhazians and Russians, and craft an argument throughout for why the war took place when it did. Although the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is still unresolved, this paper will focus on the events leading up to, and the ‘initial violent phase’, namely from August 1992 to October 1993.²

According to the Red Cross, the conflict claimed between 10,000 and 15,000 lives and left over 8000 wounded.³ Other sources, emphasizing ethnic cleansing, cite the figure for deaths as between 25,000 and 30,000.⁴ Yet other conflicts during this period, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia, have received much more attention, popularly and academically, than the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War. Apart from a handful of specialist works, centered around the same group of scholars, analysis of the war available in English is limited to unprofessional and highly biased accounts from one side or the other. In the United States and Western Europe at least, there is little, if any popular knowledge about the war. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to label the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia conflict a ‘forgotten conflict’.

Two major reasons account for the lack of knowledge and absence of mainstream study of the conflict: there was little coverage of events during the conflict, and there has been little exploration of the conflict since. In contrast, the comparatively brief developments of the August 2008 re-ignition of the war were broadcast as rolling news on the BBC, CNN and other international outlets, while the significance of Russia’s intervention led to a global debate on the limits of Western integration in the Black Sea and Caspian regions. Even then, academic and popular historians largely neglected the initial conflict for a number of reasons. It is seen by many as yet another confusing ethnic conflict in a confusing part of the world. As the noted historian of Georgia Ronald Suny observed, ‘From afar the ethnic and civil warfare in Georgia often looks to casual observers like the latest eruption of “ancient tribal conflicts” or irradicable primordial hatreds’.⁵ Others view the 1992-93 war as an internal Georgian issue that never became heinous enough to warrant international concern or as an issue to be discussed only in the context of the ‘Russian orbit’.

Part of the reason for this neglect comes from the conflict occurring at the same time as tumultuous events in Moscow and other parts of the just-broken-up Soviet Union. However, for those involved, the 1992-93 war is far from forgotten, not least because a resolution has not yet been found. A 1999 Red Cross study found that 90 percent of Abkhazians and 42 percent of Georgians say they experienced ‘negative effects’ of the conflict, including the killing or rape of relatives, the looting or destruction of homes, or being taken prisoner.⁶ Therefore, the 1992-93

² Antonenko (2005), p. 205

³ “Country report Georgia/Abkhazia: ICRC worldwide consultation on the rules of war”, (1999) (International Committee of the Red Cross), [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/Greenberg_reports/\\$File/georgia.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/Greenberg_reports/$File/georgia.pdf), 8 April, 2006.

⁴ Derluguian, Georgi M., “The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since the Soviet Collapse”, in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D Lipschutz (eds.), “The Myth of ‘Ethnic Conflict’: Politics, Economics, and Cultural Violence” (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).p. 263

⁵ Suny, Ronald Grigor, “The Making of the Georgian Nation”, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994). p. 334

⁶ Country Report Georgia/Abkhazia (1999), p. 2

Georgia-Abkhazia War can more accurately be described as a ‘forgotten conflict’ for those in the U.S., or more broadly, the ‘West’, but certainly not for those in the region.

Context

In exploring the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War, it is important to avoid a common fault of many examinations of obscure conflicts, that is, diving right in and drawing conclusions without having understood the wider context into which the war fits. When considering an ethnic conflict in a region with a history as rich and complex as that of the Caucasus, it is especially necessary to understand the conflict’s background in order to understand the conflict itself. Accordingly, the first section of this paper will focus on the history behind the conflict; the situation, ethnic and otherwise, in the region before the conflict; and the immediate events leading up to the conflict.

For many in the U.S. and Western Europe - even after the events of August 2008 - Georgia, in the South Caucasus, south of Russia and north of Armenia, is an obscure country. Even more obscure for those unfamiliar with the region are Georgia’s breakaway territories: Abkhazia in the northwest, South Ossetia in the north, and until 2004, Ajaria in the southwest. Ethnically distinct, Abkhazia and South Ossetia managed to effectively secede from Georgia through separate wars in the early 1990s. Since then, they existed with most of the governmental trappings of independent state-lets, including parliaments, presidents and militaries, and administrated their own affairs with significant Russian support, divorced from Tbilisi’s control.⁷ This situation was maintained largely due to Russian ‘peacekeepers’ on their ‘borders’ with Georgia. After Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in August 2008, the ‘peacekeeping’ contingents in both territories were significantly augmented and, in Moscow’s terminology, shifted to a status of forces hosted by the so-called independent states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Historically, Georgia has had within its borders a number of regionally-tied ethnic minority groups, including Armenians, Avars, Azeris, Greeks, Ossetians, Russians and Abkhazians.⁸ It was this situation that led the Soviet physicist and dissident, Andrei Sakharov, to describe Georgia as a ‘little empire’, just before the Abkhaz war.⁹ In 1989, ethnic Georgians made up 70.1% of the population of Georgia, or the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), while ethnic Abkhazians made up only 1.8%.¹⁰ In what was then the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), ethnic Georgians made up 45.7% of the population, while Abkhazians only numbered 17.8%.¹¹ The remainder of the population of Abkhazia was largely made up of Armenians, Greeks and Russians.

⁷ Antonenko (2005), p. 206

⁸ Jones, Stephen F., “Georgia: a failed democratic transition”, in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), “Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States” (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993), p. 293

⁹ Derluguian (1998), p. 274

¹⁰ Jones (1993), p. 289

¹¹ Zurcher, Christoph, “Georgia’s Time of Troubles, 1989-1993”, in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds) “Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution” (London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 87

Abkhazians have historically had a nebulous relationship with Georgians and Russians. Since early Byzantine times, Georgianized Abkhaz princes ruled their region with varying degrees of autonomy.¹² Although the Abkhaz language was linguistically distinct from Georgian, related to the languages of North Caucasian peoples such as the Circassians, Georgian was the official language of governance and the nobility.¹³ As Byzantium's control slipped in the 9th Century, the rulers of the Abkhaz Kingdom began efforts to unify their dynasty with that of their Georgian neighbours. In 1001 the royal lines were combined, creating what is known as the unified Georgian Kingdom. This entity lasted until the 16th Century when the Ottomans established suzerainty over the area that is modern Abkhazia.¹⁴

Until the late 17th Century, however, when the Ottomans began converting the Abkhazians to Islam, the Abkhaz princes remained mostly influenced by Georgian culture and political affinities. As Georgians and Russians fought the Ottomans and their Muslim allies in the North Caucasus in the ensuing centuries, many Abkhazians routinely shifted between Muslim identities and Orthodox Christian identities, as the politics of the day required.¹⁵ Even during the Ottoman period, various Abkhaz princes were either unified with or served as vassals to different Georgian princes.¹⁶ So, as Alexei Zverev puts it, 'both unity with Georgia and autonomy can be argued on historical grounds'.¹⁷

The Abkhazians became a minority in their own land through waves of mass emigration to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century, as Russia slowly took control of the Caucasus.¹⁸ After failed anti-Russian rebellions in 1866 and 1878, Abkhazians all but disappeared from the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi.¹⁹ The majority of Abkhazians still live outside of their homeland, most of them in Turkey and the Middle East.²⁰ In March 1921, Abkhazia was given the status of an independent Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR, but was joined with Georgia in a treaty of union later in the year. In 1931, Abkhazia's status was 'demoted' to that of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Georgia.²¹ Under Stalin's rule, Georgians were forcibly resettled in 'empty' parts of Abkhazia, leading to Abkhaz fears of losing their homeland. Abkhaz leaders petitioned Moscow in 1956, 1967 and 1978 to sever Abkhazia's connection to Georgia and incorporate it into Russia.²²

Tension between Georgians and Abkhazians simmered in the 1970s as Moscow pressured Tbilisi to push Abkhaz farmers to lower prices for their fruit and wines, famous throughout the Soviet

¹² Suny (1994), p. 321

¹³ Zverev, Alexei, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in: Bruno Coppieters (ed) "Contested Borders in the Caucasus" (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), p. 37

¹⁴ Derluigian (1998), p. 264

¹⁵ Derluigian (1998), p. 264

¹⁶ Zverev (1996), p. 39

¹⁷ Zverev (1996), p. 39

¹⁸ Derluigian (1998), p. 267

¹⁹ Derluigian (1998), p. 267

²⁰ Derluigian (1998), p. 267

²¹ Zverev (1996), p. 39

²² Zverev (1996), p. 39

Union.²³ Instead of granting separation from Georgia in response to Abkhaz petitions and complaints, however, Moscow gradually increased preferential policies toward the Abkhazians, so that by 1988, the minority Abkhaz lived better than the average Georgian, held most of the powerful positions in Abkhazia and even had their own television and radio stations, independent of Tbilisi.²⁴ This situation led to Georgian resentment of Moscow's treatment of the Abkhazians and increased ethnic tension.²⁵

It is developments such as these that have led analysts such as Christoph Zurcher to assert that the 'mechanism of Soviet ethno-federalism' is responsible for the Georgia-Abkhazia war, as well as the several other ethnically-based conflicts that broke out in the former Soviet space.²⁶ Zurcher argues that although the Armenian and Azeri minority populations in Georgia were substantially bigger than the Abkhaz and Ossetian groups, the former two did not seek independence from Tbilisi's control because the Soviet federal system had delineated regional autonomy, and the identity and symbolism that came with it, for only the Abkhaz and Ossetians, not for the other minorities in Georgia.²⁷ This argument, however, ignores the broader historical picture. The Soviet ethno-federal system, for the most part reflected the ethnic realities of the region, in place centuries before the USSR. Furthermore, the Armenians and Azeris in Georgia could be seen as 'spill-over' populations from their respective neighboring sovereign homelands. Many returned to Armenia and Azerbaijan during the periods of strife in Georgia. Other large minority groups, such as the Avars in north-eastern Georgia were 'traded', under an agreement with Daghestan, for Georgians living in that Russian autonomous region.²⁸ The Abkhazians, however, had no such option of 'return'. Their historical geographic homeland was entirely within Georgia.

Similarly, in his paper comparing the breakaway areas of Abkhazia and Ajaria, Georgi Derluguian claims that Abkhazia was destined to secede from Georgia, while Ajaria was not, because, due to the Soviet policy of demarcating ethnic distinction based on language rather than religion, Moscow had deemed the former, but not the latter, worthy of a distinct identity.²⁹ Again, this argument ignores the basic ethnic realities of the Caucasus. The Abkhazians are a distinct ethnicity, linked linguistically and culturally to peoples of the North Caucasus, such as the Chechens.³⁰ The Ajarians are an ethnic Georgian sub-group (of which there are at least seventeen), their main contemporary distinction being that the majority are Muslim, converted by the Ottomans.³¹ As will be discussed below, the Abkhaz link to the North Caucasus played an important part in the events of the 1992-93 conflict.

²³ Derluguian (1998), p. 272

²⁴ Zverev (1996), p. 39

²⁵ Jones (1993), p. 294

²⁶ Zurcher (2005), pp. 98-101

²⁷ Zurcher (2005), p. 98

²⁸ Jones (1993), p. 296

²⁹ Derluguian (1998), pp. 261-262

³⁰ Zverev (1996), p. 37

³¹ Some Abkhazians are Muslim, also converted by the Ottomans, while the rest are Orthodox Christian, 'reconverted' by the Georgians.

Historically, in fact, it seems that ethnic problems in Georgia, and specifically between the Georgians and Abkhazians, were exacerbated when leadership in Moscow underwent a period of transition or significant policy shift. Ethnic tensions increased in the period immediately following the 1917 Russian Revolution and at times in the 1970s during detente.³² The break-up of the Soviet Union and the summer of 2008 presented other such periods of transition or policy shift – in the latter case, a full-scale intervention in Georgia not long after Vladimir Putin handed over the Russian presidential reins to Dmitri Medvedev.

The following examination will reveal that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war was inextricably tied to the wider political and military events surrounding Georgian independence. Therefore, in order to accurately understand the war in question, this paper examines developments in Georgia during and after the break-up of the Soviet Union, as well as the events of the civil war in Georgia that occurred simultaneously, between January 1992 and November 1993. In an attempt to keep the focus on the Abkhaz war, this paper will not extensively address the events of the Georgian war with South Ossetia, which ended in July 1992, a month before the beginning of the war in Abkhazia.

As the consequences of Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost tore at its seams, the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s. In 1988, emboldened young lower-level communist officials and intellectuals in both Abkhazia and Georgia began organizing nationalist political campaigns, frequently directed against each other.³³ In June 1988, fifty-eight Abkhaz officials sent a letter to the Nineteenth Party Congress in Moscow, demanding support for secession from Georgia.³⁴ As the Georgian nationalist movement grew, the Georgian Communist Party, struggling to stay in power, published a series of 'Georgianization' laws beginning in December 1988, including the 'State Program for the Georgian Language', which replaced Russian with Georgian as the public sector language and established a Georgian language test for higher education.³⁵ This was a direct slight towards Abkhazians, most of whom did not speak Georgian.³⁶

On March 18, 1989, a mass assembly of 30,000 Abkhaz separatists, including over 5000 Armenians, Greeks, Russians and some ethnic Georgians met at the village of Lykhny, the historical seat of Abkhazia's princes. Here they signed a declaration demanding the restoration of Abkhazia's 1925 constitution, upgrading its status to a sovereign Soviet Republic, effectively seceding from Georgia.³⁷ The publication of this declaration in local newspapers immediately sparked furious anti-Abkhazian mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Many of those who took part were ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but as they continued for weeks, the demonstrations began to take on a wider, pro-independence character.³⁸ What had initially begun as a rally

³² Jones (1993), p. 290

³³ Derluguian (1998), p. 272

³⁴ Suny (1994), p. 321

³⁵ Jones (1993), p. 294

³⁶ Zurcher (2005), p. 90

³⁷ Zverev (1996), p. 40

³⁸ Zurcher (2005), p. 89

against Abkhaz secession from Georgia, turned into a rally for Georgian secession from the Soviet Union. This mixture of sentiments would characterize much of the developments to come.

On 9 April, 1989, Soviet troops waded into the mass of demonstrators in Tbilisi, attacking them with sharpened digging tools and toxic gas.³⁹ Nineteen people were killed, mostly young women, and hundreds were injured. Fearing they would be overthrown, the Georgian Communist leadership had asked Moscow for aid in putting down the demonstrators. The 9 April 'Tbilisi massacre' is viewed as the event that tipped the scales in favour of Georgian independence.⁴⁰ Many would contend that from here, the nationalist movement and conflict with Abkhazia were irreversible.

Meanwhile, Abkhaz demonstrations were decidedly pro-Soviet, and Abkhaz leaders tried to 'project an image of loyal Soviet citizens resisting anticommunist Georgian nationalism', by lobbying Moscow for support.⁴¹ In July of 1989, the first inter-ethnic violence erupted in Abkhazia. The Georgian faculty at Sukhumi University refused to work with the Abkhaz and Russian faculties and established a separate branch of Tbilisi State University, which was then attacked by Abkhaz nationalists, resulting in 16 deaths.⁴² As what became known as 'Tbilisi syndrome' gripped the Soviet leadership in Moscow, Georgia was left to its own devices, and the so-called 'war of laws' ensued between the Georgian Supreme Soviet and its Abkhaz counterpart.⁴³

In concessions following the 9 April massacre, the Georgian Supreme Soviet released Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a longtime Soviet dissident and Georgian nationalist leader, originally from Mingrelia, a Georgian province bordering Abkhazia from which most of the Georgians in Abkhazia also originated.⁴⁴ In November 1989, the body officially condemned Soviet Russia's annexation of Georgia in 1921 and announced that it would not recognize any Soviet law that contravened Georgian interests.⁴⁵ In March 1990, it declared Georgia a sovereign nation and legalized opposition parties.⁴⁶ In response, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared Abkhazia to be a sovereign union republic within the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ In turn, a rail blockade led by Gamsakhurdia's nationalist group pressured the Georgian Supreme Soviet to adopt a law outlawing regionally-based parties for the upcoming Georgian parliamentary election, effectively eliminating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from play.⁴⁸

28 October, 1990 saw victory for Gamsakhurdia's nationalist group in Georgia's first parliamentary elections free of Soviet control. Gamsakhurdia was elected chairman of the

³⁹ Suny (1994), p. 322

⁴⁰ Zurcher (2005), p. 90

⁴¹ 'Sovereignty After Empire', http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3_19.html, 10 April, 2006

⁴² Zverev (1996), p. 42

⁴³ Jones (1993), p. 296

⁴⁴ Zurcher (2005), p. 90

⁴⁵ Zverev (1996), p. 41

⁴⁶ Zurcher (2005), pp. 90, 92

⁴⁷ Zurcher (2005), p. 92

⁴⁸ Suny (1994), p. 325

Supreme Soviet and made it clear that his intention was to lead Georgia to full independence and to deal with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as he saw fit.⁴⁹ In December 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba, a hard-line Abkhaz separatist, (who remained ‘president’ of Abkhazia until 2005), was elected chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, and the body moved to hold separate parliamentary elections for Abkhazia.⁵⁰ In March 1991, with war raging between Georgia and seceding South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia proclaimed Ardzinba a traitor and tool of Moscow, but had almost no effective control over Abkhazia.⁵¹

That same month, Abkhazians participated in the Soviet referendum on whether to preserve the unity of the state, while Georgians were forbidden to do so by the Tbilisi government.⁵² In response, Gamsakhurdia threatened to abolish Abkhaz autonomy, and by extension its Supreme Soviet, while Ardzinba countered by arranging for a Russian airborne assault battalion to deploy in Sukhumi.⁵³ The stage was set for violent conflict. On 9 April, 1991, exactly two years after the Tbilisi massacre, the Georgian parliament declared Georgia fully independent. A month later, in an election boycotted by the Abkhazians, Gamsakhurdia became president of the new Georgia, with 86.5 percent of the vote.⁵⁴

Perhaps due to Ardzinba’s new close relationship with Russian commanders in the area, as well as increasing pressure from political rivals in Tbilisi, not to mention war in South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia decided to attempt a compromise with the Abkhaz separatists. In August 1991, a power-sharing deal was reached for the makeup of the new Abkhaz parliament based on ethnic quotas, where ethnic Abkhaz, 17.8% of the population, were guaranteed 28 of the 65 seats, while ethnic Georgians, 45.7% of Abkhazia’s population, were guaranteed only 26 seats.⁵⁵ Tbilisi’s support for this configuration would not last, however, as Gamsakhurdia’s erratic policies led to the mutiny of the Georgian National Guard he had created for the war in South Ossetia. In December 1991, five hundred National Guard soldiers laid siege to the parliament building in Tbilisi, forcing Gamsakhurdia into exile.⁵⁶

To gain legitimacy, the new forces in power invited former Soviet foreign minister and Georgian party boss, Eduard Shevardnadze to lead the transitional State Council.⁵⁷ Shortly after, Gamsakhurdia slipped back into Georgia, to Mingrelia, where forces loyal to him, the so-called ‘Zviadists’, began an insurgency in the Georgian province bordering Abkhazia.⁵⁸ Expecting war at any moment, Ardzinba and the Abkhaz leadership continued to collect allies wherever they could. In addition to cultivating local Russian commanders, the Abkhaz reached out to the Council of Russian Cossacks and the newly formed ‘Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus’, an unofficial parliament and military organization of various related ethnic groups

⁴⁹ Suny (1994), p. 325

⁵⁰ Zverev (1996), p. 42

⁵¹ Zverev (1996), p. 42

⁵² ‘Sovereignty After Empire’, http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3_19.html, 10 April, 2006

⁵³ Zverev (1996), pp. 42-43

⁵⁴ Zurcher (2005), p. 93

⁵⁵ Zurcher (2005), p. 95

⁵⁶ Zurcher (2005), p. 94

⁵⁷ Suny (1994), p. 328

⁵⁸ Suny (1994), p. 329

in the North Caucasus, including Circassians, Ossetians and Chechens.⁵⁹ Ardzinba also traveled to Turkey to try to garner support, but returned empty-handed.⁶⁰

In May 1992, Georgian deputies in the Abkhaz parliament began boycotting proceedings, complaining of discrimination. This was followed by a Georgian strike in Sukhumi and an attack by Abkhazia's National Guard on the Abkhaz Ministry of Internal Affairs, the last outpost of Tbilisi's authority in the region.⁶¹ After an increase in Russian support for secessionists in South Ossetia, including Russian helicopter attacks on Georgian villages, Shevardnadze was forced into a cease-fire in July 1992.⁶² On 23 July, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet passed a resolution, without the participation of the Georgian deputies, restoring the 1925 Abkhaz constitution and Abkhazia's status as a sovereign republic within what was then the Soviet Union.⁶³ Then, on 11 August, a high-ranking delegation from Tbilisi, including the minister of the interior and the national security advisor, was kidnapped by Gamsakhurdia's forces in Mingrelia while trying to negotiate with them.⁶⁴ It was alleged that the hostages were taken into Abkhazia. On 14 August, 1992, full-blown violent conflict broke out between the Abkhaz National Guard and the Georgian National Guard, sent to Abkhazia ostensibly to retrieve the hostages.⁶⁵

War

Instead of looking for hostages, Georgian tanks rolled into Sukhumi and engaged with Abkhaz forces defending the city. It is thought that Abkhaz forces fired on Georgians first at the village of Ilovi, 50 kilometers outside the capital.⁶⁶ The Georgian government claimed that it had notified Ardzinba of Georgian plans to enter Abkhazia, but he denied this.⁶⁷ Depending on the source, between 2000 and 5000 Georgian National Guard troops crossed the border and headed for Sukhumi, while another 1000 troops landed in Gagra, in northwestern Abkhazia, to seal off the border with Russia.⁶⁸ Abkhaz resistance proved much stiffer than anticipated and heavy fighting broke out in and around Sukhumi.

However, a cease-fire was negotiated on 15 August while Russian troops evacuated tourists from the resorts along the Black Sea and Georgian forces withdrew from Sukhumi.⁶⁹ On 18 August full hostilities resumed and Georgian forces re-took Sukhumi, forcing Ardzinba and the separatist

⁵⁹ Derlugian (1998), p. 274

⁶⁰ Chervonnaya, Svetlana, "Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow", tr. Ariane Chanturia (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1994) p. 113

⁶¹ Zverev (1996), p. 48

⁶² Zurcher (2005), pp. 94-95

⁶³ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 112

⁶⁴ Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 115-116

⁶⁵ Zurcher (2005), p. 96

⁶⁶ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 159

⁶⁷ Zverev (1996), p. 48

⁶⁸ Antonenko (2005), p. 212

⁶⁹ Zverev (1996), p. 48

Abkhaz leadership to flee to Gudauta, the site of a Russian base in western Abkhazia.⁷⁰ Georgian National Guard units occupied the Abkhaz parliament and a military administrative council of 8 officers was set up.⁷¹ Shevardnadze declared on television that, 'Now we can say that Georgian authority has been restored throughout the entire territory of the republic'.⁷²

Achieving that goal was to prove slightly more difficult. If any tactical objectives are to be ascribed to the Georgian operation, they seem to have been to secure the main northwest-to-southeast road running through Abkhazia and to seal off the mountain passes to the North Caucasus.⁷³ These objectives were never met, resulting in a resilient Abkhaz resistance able to move about the territory, as well as a steady stream of North Caucasian fighters moving southwards to supplement it, over 1000 by September 1992.⁷⁴ On 3 September, talks between Shevardnadze, Yeltsin and Ardzinba were held in Moscow where the Abkhaz leader signed a document authorizing the presence of Georgian troops in Abkhazia. The talks fell through, however, when Abkhaz forces recaptured Gagra in October 1992.⁷⁵

As hostilities continued, the conduct of undisciplined forces on both sides towards civilians grew worse. Villages were routinely looted and burned, and civilians were slaughtered or taken hostage.⁷⁶ Troop numbers swelled, as both sides enacted emergency conscription measures and a host of 'volunteers', from Transnistrian Russians to Islamist terrorist Shamil Basayev's 'Chechen Battalion', joined the Abkhaz cause.⁷⁷ Groups of bandits, some tied to one or more of the several sides involved, roamed remote areas with impunity. As another attempted cease-fire fell apart in November 1992, Abkhaz forces began shelling Sukhumi.⁷⁸ In February 1993, the situation grew chaotic, as Gamsakhurdia's Zviadist insurgents began raids on the Georgian rear and Russian planes bombed Sukhumi.⁷⁹ Early July 1993 saw an amphibious landing of Abkhaz forces near Sukhumi and a renewed attack on the city, prompting Zviadist fighters to come to the aid of regular Georgian forces.⁸⁰

On 27 July, another Russian-brokered cease-fire was signed by the belligerent parties in Sochi, just across the Russian border, that led to the withdrawal of Georgian troops from positions in Abkhazia. Thinking the conflict was over, Georgian civilians returned to Sukhumi, while Georgian troops staggered back into Mingrelia, many of them joining Gamsakhurdia's insurgency.⁸¹ As Zviadist attacks on regular Georgian and Abkhaz forces grew in early September 1993, the Abkhaz forces launched their largest offensive of the war, breaking the terms

⁷⁰ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 160

⁷¹ Zverev (1996), p. 48

⁷² Zverev (1996), p. 49

⁷³ Zverev (1996), p. 50

⁷⁴ Antonenko (2005), p. 212

⁷⁵ Zverev (1996), p. 53

⁷⁶ Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 162-163

⁷⁷ Antonenko (2005), p. 212, Zverev (1996), p. 53

⁷⁸ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 160

⁷⁹ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 163

⁸⁰ Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 165-166

⁸¹ Zverev (1996), p. 54

of the cease-fire and capturing Sukhumi on 27 September.⁸² Shevardnadze's pleas for Russian help produced only condemnation and nominal sanctions of the Abkhazians, as they routed the remaining Georgian forces and drove some 200,000 Georgian civilians across the Inguri River into Georgia proper.⁸³

The Georgian civil war continued through October and November of 1993, as Zviadist forces captured the Black Sea port of Poti and blocked food supplies from reaching Tbilisi. Fearing the complete dismemberment of Georgia, Shevardnadze enlisted Russian support to quell the insurgency.⁸⁴ It is thought that around this time, as Georgian forces surrounded a remote hamlet in Mingrelia, Zviad Gamsakhuria died in mysterious circumstances.⁸⁵ The consequences of Russian support were that Georgia had to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, effectively re-entering the Russian orbit, and negotiate basing agreements allowing Russian troops to remain on Georgian soil.⁸⁶

Russia's Role

So far, this article has looked at the entire time period targeted. However, the analysis has focused mainly on the Abkhaz and Georgian roles in the 1992-93 war. As it has been alluded, however, Russia played a significant role in the conflict in a variety of ways. It was mentioned earlier that historically, increased ethnic strife in the Caucasus coincided with periods of transition or policy shift in Moscow. Dmitri Trenin seems to bolster this assertion when he posits that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war took place during a period of transition in Russian foreign policy, from a rejection of 'empire-building' and a view towards Western integration in 1991, to a reassertion of geopolitical concerns and a traditional view of control in Russia's 'near abroad' by 1993.⁸⁷

In general, as Trenin observes, during the Abkhaz war, 'Russia's aim appears to have been to try to restore its influence throughout the region, on all sides, in every conflict, in order to prevent developments from slipping out of control and so opening the floodgates to outside interference'.⁸⁸ However, although Russian elements were involved on all sides of the conflict, the amount of control Moscow exerted over their actions is unclear. Local Russian military commanders certainly had a personal stake in the war: to protect their sanatoria and dachas in Abkhazia.⁸⁹

⁸² Zverev (1996), p. 54

⁸³ Chervonnaya (1994), p. 167

⁸⁴ Suny (1994), p. 331

⁸⁵ Suny (1994), p. 331

⁸⁶ Zurcher (2005), pp. 96-97

⁸⁷ Trenin, Dmitri, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region", in Bruno Coppieters (ed) "Contested Borders in the Caucasus" (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), pp. 93-94

⁸⁸ Trenin (1996), p. 99

⁸⁹ Zverev (1996), p. 53

In her comprehensive examination of Russia's role in the conflict, Oksana Antonenko reveals that before the Georgian National Guard initially moved into Abkhazia in August 1992, Russian units in the region transferred substantial amounts of military hardware to the Georgians, including over 100 tanks.⁹⁰ It seems that Yeltsin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were sympathetic towards Shevardnadze's efforts, while Defense Ministry officials were split down the middle in their loyalties, and Russian commanders on the ground were almost all sympathetic to the Abkhaz cause.⁹¹ Regional Russian officials even played a part in training and equipping the Abkhaz North Caucasian allies.⁹²

As the war grew into a stalemate, official Russian policy aligned more closely with the opinions of Russian forces in the region. It seems that Moscow sanctioned the transfer to the Abkhazians of large amounts of armaments from the Russian base at Gudauta, while Russian commanders continued to supply Abkhaz forces with intelligence and planning support.⁹³ Interestingly, at one point, when Russian planes and pilots were bombing Sukhumi, other Russian units continued to supply Georgian forces with weaponry.⁹⁴ Overall, whatever the strategy Moscow was attempting to implement, it seems that Russian policy during the violent phase of the conflict manifested itself in what Trenin has called 'chaotic involvement'.⁹⁵ This gave way to a decidedly anti-Georgian stance in the 'frozen' phase and finally the full re-ignition of the conflict in 2008.

Conclusion

The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war can best be understood as stemming from parallel movements for national liberation that contradicted one another. The Georgians asserted their independence from Russian control. Simultaneously, the Abkhazians sought closer ties with the Russians in order to assert their independence from Georgian control. Although both sides had attempted these actions in the past, the tumultuous break-up of the Soviet Union, characterized by a significant transition and policy shift in Moscow, tipped historical tensions over the edge, into armed conflict.

Stephen Jones posits that the freedoms of perestroika changed Georgian nationalism, 'from a force for liberation and democratization to one of ethnic hegemonism and anti-pluralism'.⁹⁶ Given the outlook of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the mandate he received in Georgia's first post-Soviet elections, this assertion seems accurate. However, a similar statement can also be made about Abkhaz nationalism at the time. Both ethnic groups gravitated towards increasingly uncompromising positions, as manifested in the 'war of laws' that preceded the war of arms. The ethnic history of the region explains why this move was possible for both sides, but not why it

⁹⁰ Antonenko (2005), p. 209

⁹¹ Antonenko (2005), p. 211

⁹² Antonenko (2005), p. 212

⁹³ Antonenko (2005), p. 214

⁹⁴ Zverev (1996), p. 53

⁹⁵ Trenin (1996), p. 101

⁹⁶ Jones (1993), p. 288

occurred at that moment. Moscow's chaotic involvement during a time of unstable transition, however, provides an explanation for the outbreak of war in August 1992.