

## Supplementary Notes to Svetlana Tscherwonnaja's

### *Blumen den Siegern, Blumen mit Blut*

by

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I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate Steffi Chotiwari-Ju/nger for translating, and the BGG for publishing, Svetlana Tscherwonnaja's *Blumen den Siegern, Blumen mit Blut* (Mitteilungsblatt der Berliner Georgischen Gesellschaft 24, Januar 1994) as a wonderful example to its readership of the utter tendentiousness that characterises all publications on the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict emanating from Tbilisi or, as in this case, an apparently ethnic Russian in Moscow. However, unfortunately the observations that palpably should have accompanied this German translation to warn uninformed German readers against taking Miss Tscherwonnaja's arguments at face-value for some reason seem not to have found their way into the published variant, with the result that the naive may be forgiven for supposing that the translator and the editorial board of the newsletter actually share the views propounded in this article. May I, therefore, respectfully ask the editor(s) to allow an interested Englishman to participate in what has evidently been a multi-national debate on this issue in the pages of your newsletter by filling this particular *lacuna*?

The Abkhaz-Georgian conflict is apparently no older than 1988. The national *fora* of both South Ossetia (**Adæmon Naxas**) and Abkhazia (**Aydgalara**, formed to safeguard Abkhazian interests in late 1988) are 'anti-Georgian, undemocratic' organisations, set up with the main aim of opposing the informal movement of the Georgian people for 'freedom from communist dictatorship'. With this the background to the picture is coloured in; Soviet communism is (rightly) despised in the West; the Georgians are simply exercising their democratic right and trying to break free of it, which means that, in the main, the actions of the informal leaders of this movement must be praiseworthy (even if Miss Tscherwonnaja does accept that they made 'mistakes'); anyone whose actions do not wholeheartedly give support to such worthy aims must be anti-Georgian and undemocratic. In case the correct frame of mind might not yet have been established in the reader, the Abkhazian National Forum (ANF) is depicted as the tool of the 'egotistical interests of the Party- and Soviet nomenklatura', which are 'to preserve their positions in the paradise of Abkhazian holiday-resorts'. What more needs to be said? As advocates of honest Western democracy and capitalism, we readers know whose side we should be on, don't we? Well, perhaps it is not quite as simple as Miss Tscherwonnaja would have us believe...

I shall not recapitulate here the details I have given elsewhere (1993) of the long history that underlies Abkhazian dissatisfaction with having had to live since 1931 (only) at the mercy of decisions taken in an often hostile and certainly never friendly Tbilisi. Suffice it to say that there were good indications as early as 1988 that 'the informal movement of the Georgian people' would lead to a renewal of the aggressive anti-Abkhazian, georgianising campaign of 1937-1953, which saw the forced implantation of thousands of (largely) Mingrelians onto Abkhazian soil, the banning of Abkhazian publications, the closure of Abkhazian schools and their replacement by Georgian schools. One did not need the aid of a crystal-ball to make this prediction, Messrs. Gamsakhurdia and Kostava openly called for a return to the methods of 1937-1953 in their letter 'To the Georgians of West Georgia', about the content of which Miss Tschervonnaja says not a single word, although she styles it a 'well-known letter' — well-known (or, more appositely, notorious) in Abkhazia perhaps but not, I suspect, in Berlin... If the covert activities of Georgian Stalin and his Mingrelian Transcaucasian lieutenant, Lavrenti Beria, are widely condemned today, why should the Mingrelians Kostava and Gamsakhurdia have been allowed to get away with an overt repetition of Beria's policies in the imminently post-Soviet Georgia of the late 1980s?

It is true that prior to the final collapse of Soviet power leaders of the ANF often openly expressed their solidarity with Moscow and the goals of *perestrojka*, which in uninformed Western observers might well have occasioned some unease. But let us consider the facts of life for a nation of a mere 100,000 Abkhazians placed inside Georgia in 1931 by none other than Stalin. The Soviet Union still existed, which meant that the West, whether concerned or (more likely) not, would not have intervened in an ethnic conflict on Soviet territory. Faced with the ever growing dangers of chauvinism in Georgia which threatened (it is true) not only the Abkhazians but which quite obscenely in their case charged that they were mere 17th century 'newcomers' to 'Georgian' soil, when in fact it was only after the forced migration of most of the Abkhazian population to Ottoman lands post-1864 that Kartvelians started to appear in Abkhazia in significant numbers<sup>1</sup>, there was a grass-roots movement in Abkhazia

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<sup>1</sup>The reason why Georgians have been arguing this way since the time of the historian D. Bakradze in the latter half of the 19th century but most especially since this fiction was re-invented by P'avle Ingoroq'va in the late 1940s is that, according to Georgian logic, settlers are apparently lower-class citizens than the presumed 'indigenous' people, and the more recent the settlers' arrival, the fewer their rights will be. Hence in 1988-89 the main rallying-cry of the nationalists in Tbilisi was "Georgie for the Georgians!". And Prof. Revaz Mishveladze advocated in print in the middle of 1989 that Georgia could accommodate only 5% of 'guests' -- in 1989 the Kartvelian (much less the Georgian) percentage of the population of Georgia amounted to only 70.1%. Faced with this sinister Ingoroq'van fantasy, it was only natural for Abkhazians (and indeed others) to counter this argument by alluding to its absurdities and blatant falsehoods. However, no-one should naively imagine that the mere act of demolishing this argument in academic terms is tantamount to making the political claim that only

which sought to do what many nationalities (of whom the Georgians were just one) across the vast Soviet territories were doing, namely reasserting their historical rights in the light of *perestrojka-glasnost'*. Clearly the Georgians in Tbilisi would have been in no mood to listen to (let alone acknowledge the justification of) Abkhazian anxieties, and so the only alternative was to seek support from the one power that was in a position to lend it, namely Moscow.

The organ of the NFA, **Edinenie**, is portrayed as a rather sinister publication in whose pages one found anonymous 'Informationen'. One such is quoted from the July issue of 1990, in which the activities of some local Kartvelian nationalists are described. This reference is presented as part of the 'anti-Georgian' NFA/nomenklatura campaign. In fact, the quotation comes from a lengthy report, running to almost 4 complete pages of this tabloid-size journal, entitled 'Intelligence on some results of the investigation into the events that took place in Sukhum and other towns and regions of the Abkhazian ASSR on 15-16 July 1989'. This report contains relevant information on the background to the killings in Sukhum and Ochamchira, and not unnaturally it includes descriptions of activities on the part of those who were agitating on behalf of the Georgian nationalist cause in Abkhazia. One such was Nugzar Mgaloblishvili, described by Miss Tscherwonnaja as 'the artist', who was one of the most active promoters in Abkhazia of Gamsakhurdia's anti-Abkhazian policies. After devoting so much space to the report, the editor simply added in brackets that there followed the signatures of those who made up the investigative commission. So the lack of any personal attribution here is not quite the sinister act it might at first appear to be.

When the mass-meeting which called for restitution of Abkhazia's full republican status took place in Lykhny on 18 March 1989 it was attended by representatives of all the nationalities in Abkhazia (not just Abkhazians), who subsequently also signed the resulting Declaration. This meeting, branded by Miss Tscherwonnaja as a 'calculated provocation', may well have been sanctioned by the authorities in Sukhum, but this does not mean that it went ahead 'with the participation of the entire Party- and Soviet leadership of the autonomous republic', as stated. At this time the First Secretary in Abkhazia was Boris Adleiba. He had come to be regarded by the mass of Abkhazians

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Abkhazians (sc. the indigenous population of Abkhazia) have rights within the Republic of Abkhazia, or that Abkhazia exists only for the Abkhazians such that other ethnic groups, specifically the Kartvelians, should be expelled. As far as I am aware, not a single Abkhazian or any of their supporters has ever made such a claim, for to do so would be to lower oneself to the debased level of argument favoured by the likes of Ingoroq'va, Mishveladze, etc... When a ridiculous charge is made, it has to be shewn for what it truly is: arrant nonsense. Nor of course can the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict be resolved by these academic debates -- what would certainly help would be for historians, linguists and ethnographers to refrain from besmirching their disciplines by placing them at the service of the nationalist politics of their nations in the first place.

as a traitor to his people and country for his willingness to sell property in Abkhazia to more incoming Kartvelians (largely Mingrelians). As one Abkhazian subsequently put it to me: 'By adding his signature to this grass-roots expression of Abkhazian aspirations he redeemed himself in the eyes of his people with the simple stroke of a pen'. This does not sound like Party-manipulation of the masses to this observer. Adleiba was promptly removed from office by the Tbilisi authorities, who put in his place a docile puppet called Khishba. When I met Adleiba after the July 1989 killings in a meeting with Georgian First Secretary, Givi Gumbaridze, Khishba and the local Ochamchira Regional Secretary, Sergei Baghapsh, Adleiba was a physical wreck as a result of the pressure the Georgians had put upon him and died shortly thereafter.

Miss Tscherwonnaja evidently feels that 'the cultivation of the cancerous swelling of the national ambitions in Abkhazia' was too sensitive to be left to develop in mere Abkhazian hands, and so she has to thicken the plot by introducing a Moscow-agent. In this role she identifies none other than Dr. Yuri Voronov 'sent to Abkhazia by the Centre for the preparation of future anti-Georgian public appearances and provocations'. It may then come as a surprise to readers to learn that, in fact, Dr. Voronov has spent his entire life living and working in Abkhazia, researching the archaeology and history of the region. Though married to a Georgian, he never allowed himself to fall victim to the Georgian nationalist dictates that always set the mould for 'scholarly' work on Abkhazian culture within Georgia. Because of this he was faced with great opposition in Tbilisi when it came to trying to get his work published; the Georgian academic-political community even took their complaints as high as the Soviet Politburo figure of Mikheil Suslov, as described by Voronov himself as recently as 1992. It is a pity that Miss Tscherwonnaja neglected to inform her readers that during the anti-Abkhazian campaign run by local Kartvelians in 1989 Voronov's house-museum was put to the torch (in ominous anticipation of the fate which befell the Abkhazian Research Institute, Archives, Museum and University in November 1992)...

The tragic events and bloody clashes of mid-July 1989 are stated by Miss Tscherwonnaja to have been organised by the NFA. As one who was in Abkhazia at the time, living about one mile from the scene of the fighting over the Ghalidzga Bridge on the morning of 16th July, I can tell our authoress that it was only the quick-thinking action of a group of Abkhazians who exploded a tanker on this bridge that prevented thousands of armed Mingrelians from flooding north to continue the blood-letting their compatriots, along with a group of Svans, had unleashed the previous evening in Sukhum. As part of the planning on the Kartvelian side the prison in Mingrelia's capital, Zugdidi, had been opened and arms given to the prisoners to go and support the

'patriotic' Kartvelian cause. I have spoken to both Abkhazians and Mingrelians who witnessed the fighting in Sukhum on 15 July, and it is clear that the fighting began only when a group of Svans, stripped to the waist and wearing a headband to identify one another, appeared from the back of a lorry. This Kartvelian 'calculation' is described in great detail in the work of a freelance Russian reporter, Viktor Popkov, who happened to be in Abkhazia at the time working on an excavation in Tamsh. His articles were rejected for publication as far too sensitive by all the Soviet papers he approached; an English translation was subsequently prepared, however, and sent to every American senator. I shall be happy to supply a copy to BGG, if requested.

Part of this 1989 provocation against Abkhazians and their culture involved the moves to establish in Sukhum a branch of Tbilisi State University. The Abkhazians strenuously, but peaceably, objected to this as being a direct threat to the continued viability of the Abkhazian State University, which, since its inception in 1978, had catered mainly for Kartvelian students from West Georgia and then in equal measure for Russians and Abkhazians. In the conditions prevailing at the time only Moscow could sanction the opening of institutes of higher learning anywhere in the USSR, and the official commission despatched by Moscow to investigate these events surrounding the opening of the branch condemned it as totally illegal. Tbilisi pushed on regardless, and, when the Abkhazians attempted to prevent entrance-exams going ahead by laying siege to the relevant building, they were attacked by the Svan contingent referred to above.

After the killings in July 1989, the leanings of the Khishba government were irrelevant, as Khishba was universally condemned for, reportedly, having preferred to watch a football match rather than take action to ease the tensions over the branch of Tbilisi University. Events in Abkhazia were shaped by the NFA until Vladislav Ardzanba came to prominence, ultimately as President. The Abkhazians have acted since 1989 solely in the interests of Abkhazia (and all peoples living therein). The internal politicking of the Kartvelians in Georgia proper, which in the full glare of world-publicity has brought the country to utter ruination, has been of no concern to them, for they simply wanted to be rid of the whole rotten mess. If one is looking anywhere in Georgia for 'the planned formation of a "fifth column" against the independence of Georgia' or 'a personally and financially organised, ideological preparation of a war', one could hardly do better than look more closely at those in Tbilisi who chose the barrel of a gun to oust in a bloody coup a legally elected president, subsequently calling home to rule them the best known Georgian communist since the death of Stalin, Eduard Shevardnadze...

Miss Tscherwonnaja re-applies the 'anti-democratic' label to the Abkhazian authorities when she links them to the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, 'an aggressive, extremist organisation, ready to fight against the foe'. Readers might like to familiarise themselves with the constitution of this organisation to see how 'aggressive, extremist' it actually is — an English text is readily available as Appendix 4 of my 1993 article.

Shevardnadze is nai/vely presented, as is regularly the case in the West (Germany and America in particular), as defender of 'the territorial integrity of a democratic Georgia' with a political platform that generously recognised the need to preserve all Georgia's autonomies (sc. South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Ajaria); in addition, he is credited with ending the war in South Ossetia. Whilst it is true that, after an initial escalation on the part of the Georgians, a ceasefire was negotiated in South Ossetia in June 1992, there has been no move to find a political solution to the problem of South Ossetia's status to this day. The South Ossetians are adamant that they will not allow South Ossetia to return to being ruled by a chauvinist Tbilisi, and all commentators agree that South Ossetia is already *de facto* linked to North Ossetia as part of the Russian Federation. The Abkhazians likewise have no reason to feel that, as regards Tbilisi's attitudes towards Georgia's ethnic minorities, there is one iota of difference between the policies pursued by Gamsakhurdia and those pursued since March 1992 by Shevardnadze.

During the years of Gamsakhurdia's ascendancy Soviet legislation affecting Georgia (sc. post-1921) began to be unpicked, and after his overthrow the ruling State Council annulled all post-1921 legislation, returning to the Menshevik constitution of early 1921. Since Abkhazia was subordinated to Georgia only in 1931, this act of the Georgian authorities left Abkhazia without any constitutional status. It was for this reason that they were compelled to re-introduce as a planned temporary measure their own earlier constitution, namely that of 1925, wherein Abkhazia had the status of a full republic. It should also be recalled that in the all-Union referendum of 17 March, boycotted by Kartvelians in general, there was an absolute majority of the total electorate eligible to cast a vote within Abkhazia in favour of remaining part of the planned re-vamped Soviet Union — this is to say that the majority in Abkhazia did NOT want to break away as part of an independent Georgia, recognising that Georgian chauvinism was as much a threat to Russian, Armenian, Greek, Estonian, Ukrainian and other minorities anywhere inside Georgia as to the Abkhazians themselves. Contrary to popular belief, the Abkhazians have never declared Abkhazia to be independent of Georgia, even after their final military victory over Georgia's rag-bag of an army in September 1993. The intention always was (and still remains) that the post-Soviet status of Abkhazia should be determined by a referendum of the whole

population. The Abkhazians themselves prefer independence and feel confident that, when this referendum is conducted, the majority will agree with such aspirations. The referendum will only be carried out once all refugees who committed no crimes or abuses of human rights during the 14-month Georgian occupation have returned to the republic. Do we need any further examples of what Miss Tscherwonnaja understands by the term 'anti-democratic'?

Miss Tscherwonnaja asseverates that responsibility for the actions of the Abkhazian government cannot be laid at the door of Abkhazia's 'multi-national intelligentsia', who 'opposed the new dictatorship' and 'formed themselves into opposition-parties, blocks, deputy-fractions ("Democratic Abkhazia")'. Clearly Miss Tscherwonnaja has no great respect for the intellectual attainments of the autochthonous residents of Abkhazia whom she implicitly denigrates as totally lacking an intelligentsia, for the Abkhazian government is in the happy position of being able to boast the universal support of all Abkhazians (sc. other than certain puppets resident in Tbilisi and frequently wheeled out for propaganda-purposes by the Georgian authorities), none of whom joined these Kartvelian oppositionist groups.

Miss Tscherwonnaja makes the same mistake as most Western politicians and journalists in assuming that everything that Shevardnadze says must be true. Talk of a 'red-brown army' active in Abkhazia to 'restore a totalitarian system' is designed to elicit even greater Western sympathy and to excuse the humiliating military defeat inflicted on the Georgians by the coalition of Abkhazians, North Caucasian volunteers, and the other residents of Abkhazia, who had suffered appallingly at the hands of the initial Georgian invasion-force, indiscriminating in their perpetration of human-rights' abuses (relevant detailed documentation was submitted to Amnesty International as early as April 1993, and more has followed since then).

The charge that the Abkhazian authorities wanted to preserve the Soviet *status quo*, with economic stagnation and no privatisation of land is rather belied by regular attempts on the part of the leadership in Sukhum from the late 1980s to interest Turkish businessmen (often of Abkhazian origin) in investing in Abkhazia and introducing Western methods.

The current Abkhazian president is described as having joined the Communist Party at the age of 22. Surely Miss Tscherwonnaja is aware that many budding scholars all over the former USSR would join the Party at a similar age simply in order to ensure their future advancement up the academic hierarchy — it would be interesting to discover how many members of the Party were ever true believers. A member of this

(un)distinguished group would surely have to be one Eduard Shevardnadze, who ruled Georgia as a committed pro-Brezhnev apparatchik from 1972 to 1985, and who has recently returned to some of his well-tried former methods (such as closing down opposition-papers), as observed by the impressively detailed and fair *Der Kampf um das goldene Vlies* (**Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konflikt-Forschung**, Report 8, 1993, Frankfurt am Main).

The Abkhazian elections in October/December 1991 are condemned for being conducted on ethnic lines, producing an assembly consisting of 28 Abkhazians, 26 Kartvelians, 11 Others. It is claimed that this arrangement was the one preferred by the Abkhazians themselves — it was not. They wished to have a bi-cameral system that would have avoided a straight opposing of representatives of the different ethnic groups. This was rejected by Gamsakhurdia in Tbilisi, who forced the system despised by Miss Tschervonnaja on the Abkhazians in the hope of preserving the (pro-Georgian) *status quo* (a two-thirds majority was imposed for all fundamental votes). Interestingly, in the draft-constitution for the Republic of Abkhazia prepared with the help of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation (The Hague) in 1993 it is the Abkhazians' own preference for the bi-cameral system that is again proposed now that the destructive hand of chauvinist Georgia has been thrown off.

#### References

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