

Reply to Prof. R. Pipes' "The Caucasus: A New Middle Eastern Tinderbox?"
(10 April 1997)

To speak only of the UK press, of which I have direct experience, though I suspect the same probably applies in the US, there tends to be a rather arrogant assumption that 'our correspondents know best'. The result is that, when a remote and largely unknown part of the world suddenly hits the headlines, the nearest correspondent is despatched to report the incident, even though (s)he may have no knowledge of the background and will almost certainly not know the local language(s). Errors are to be expected, but media-machoism seems to demand reluctance both to accept criticism and to make the necessary emendations. Ever since the tiny Caucasian province of Abkhazia found itself commanding Western media-attention (in 1978 as a result of anti-Georgian demonstrations; again in July 1989 when deaths resulted from ethnic clashes engineered by nationalist opposition-leaders in central Georgia; finally in 1992-93 during the bitter war initiated when Shevardnadze ordered in his rag-bag fighters to quell, entirely peaceful and constitutional, moves to loosen ties with Tbilisi), it has been all but impossible to read the word 'Abkhazians' without the accompanying epithet 'Muslim' (and often 'Turkic-speaking' in addition). It is sad to see even such a distinguished academic colleague as Harvard's Richard Pipes repeating the former of these formulae. Journalist Thomas Goltz has already criticised Pipes' piece in this and some other respects, but I think more can be said on the specific issue of Abkhazia.

Firstly, Pipes suggests that Russia acquired control of Georgia by force of arms when he speaks of Transcaucasia as 'a region that the Russians conquered nearly two centuries ago'. This is not so. No 'Georgia' as such existed at that time: the combined kingdoms of (central) Kartli and (eastern) K'akheti had been annexed by Russia in 1801, exhausted after centuries of harrying by Persia; to the west of the dividing Likhi Mts, Mingrelia was the first area to sue for Russian protection from Turkey in 1803, and the larger kingdom of Imereti followed in 1804. Abkhazia, an independent principedom, peopled almost exclusively by the native Abkhazian population (speaking their North West Caucasian language, totally unrelated to either Mingrelian or Georgian -- though sister-languages, Mingrelian and Georgian are NOT mutually intelligible) was left exposed and fell victim to Russian machinations in 1810, though it continued to administer its own affairs until the end of the Caucasian War in 1864. Abkhazian communities in the mountainous regions of the country supported the war being waged by their brethren (especially the Ubykhs and Circassians) over the Caucasus mountains. Georgians, on the other hand, fully supported Russia's territorial drive and fought on Russia's side.

Christianity was introduced in Abkhazia during the time of Justinian (6th century). When Ottoman Turkey began to extend its influence around the Black Sea (c.1500), Islam was introduced to the Abkhazians, Ubykhs and Circassians. It is natural to assume that those Abkhazians most strongly inclined to Islam will have been those to leave their native soil to have freedom in pursuit of their religion in Ottoman lands (along with ALL the Ubykhs and most of the Circassians) in the wake of the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus in 1864 -- most ethnic Abkhazians and Circassians today live in Turkey, where their demanding and beautiful languages are most likely destined to share the same fate as that of Ubykh, which became extinct in the autumn of 1992. Whilst families back in Abkhazia know whether they come from Christian or Islamic traditions, there is no fanatical attachment to either doctrine -- as the father of Abkhazian literature, Dmitri Gulia (1874-1960), wrote in his memoirs: 'We Abkhazians are equally cool towards both religions'. Well apprised of Western (especially American) sensitivities about (part of) the Muslim world, Georgian propaganda has consistently tried to tar the Abkhazians by portraying them as adherents of this calling. The phrase 'Muslim Abkhazians' is in one sense meaningless, but in another it is all too meaningful -- the deprecating nuance present for many Westerners in the adjective subtly implies support for the 'Christian' Georgians. Since Georgia was the aggressor

in the Georgian-Abkhazian war (again as Goltz has correctly observed!), one might even argue that this simple phrase actually suggests support for that aggression.

To sum up the tragedy of the Abkhazian war thus: 'Moscow initiated a "national-liberation" movement among the 100,000 Abkhazians...The rebellion stopped only after Georgia agreed to let in a force of some 8,000 Russian soldiers' is so totally to misrepresent what happened both at the start and at the end of the fighting as to be almost beneath contempt and again betrays too ready an acceptance of the Georgian propagandist line of argument. Even if one paid not the slightest attention to the history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations this century (see the historical chapters in the forthcoming 'The Abkhazians: A Handbook' edited by George Hewitt, Curzon Press, London, summer 1997), all one needed to do to appreciate that the cause of the hostilities (firstly in July 1989, and then, in a direct sequential line, August 1992) lay with the Georgians themselves was to read what they were writing/saying about the Abkhazians in their Georgian-language media. But how many Western politicians, diplomats, or academic sovietologists were in a position to do this?! And are any of them any better qualified today?! The simple way out, especially if one is already imbued with antipathy to the Russian Bear, is just to accept and repeat what the West's new 'democratic' friend in Transcaucasia imparts to you. The standard Georgian line has been that the Abkhazians are relatively 'recent' arrivals in Abkhazia -- this is quite ludicrous, but in the logic of those who make the claim they feel justified in reaching such conclusions as the following, published in the Georgian newspaper *Young Communist* (29th July 1989) by writer/academic Prof. Revaz Mishveladze: 'Georgia stands on the brink of a real catastrophe -- of extirpation. What devil ruled our minds, when we yielded up our land, gained inch by inch over the centuries, defended and soaked with our blood, to every homeless beggar that has come down from the fringes of the Caucasus, to tribes that have neither history nor culture? We must make every effort to raise the percentage of Georgians in the population of Georgia (currently 61% [a misprint for 71%]) to 95%. The remaining 5% must consist of only those who know Georgian, who have a proper respect for Georgia, who have been brought up under the influence of the Georgian national phenomenon. We must persuade other nationalities, who are multiplying suspiciously in the land of David the Builder, that ideal conditions for the development of their personalities are to be found only in their homelands'. Such threats to their physical survival set the Abkhazians on their mettle in the days of Perestrojka and the clashes of 1989 ensued. Since the self-same arguments were being made in the run up to the 1992 war AND ARE BEING REPEATED TODAY, what reason do the Abkhazians have for thinking that their fate will be any kinder if they return to the 'status quo ante bellum', especially when the aggressor enjoys such uncritical support in Washington, Bonn, and London?

Pipes is quite wrong to speak of an Abkhazian 'rebellion', for this conflict is no such thing, but, even accepting the term, he is also in error to think that the 'rebellion stopped' with the introduction of Russian troops to Georgia. The WAR came to an end when the Abkhazian alliance ejected the Georgian (or, as I prefer to say, Kartvelian, for Mingrelians and Svans were involved as well as Georgians proper) invaders along with Shevardnadze himself (foolishly held up in the besieged Abkhazian capital, Sukhum, instead of staying in his own capital, Tbilisi, sorting out the appalling consequences of his rash decision to start hostilities 14 months earlier) at the end of September 1993. Since the democratically elected (but megalomaniac) Zviad Gamsakhurdia, ousted from the Georgian presidency in January 1992 was still being actively supported by his fellow-Mingrelians in Mingrelia, the rout of Shevardnadze's men from Abkhazia meant that they were subjected to further distress in neighbouring Mingrelia as they sought the safety of purely Georgian soil. Gamsakhurdia returned from exile with Gen. Dudaev in Chechnia and started to lead his supporters eastwards out of Mingrelia. Town after town just fell into his grasp as he proceeded, and it looked as though he would take Georgia's second city, Kutaisi, in a matter of days. At this point, Shevardnadze realised that (as usual!) his only hope was the Kremlin. He immediately took Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States, and lo! Russian 'humanitarian' aid

arrived in western Georgia, and the Gamsakhurdia rebellion 'sensu stricto' collapsed. Gamsakhurdia perished in mysterious circumstances over the 1993-94 New Year.

Received wisdom [sic!] has it that Russia won the war for Abkhazia. It cannot be denied that among Russians in general there is great sympathy for the Abkhazians' plight, for every Russian knows in what contempt Russians are commonly held by the average Georgian, but, since there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Yeltsin knew in advance of Shevardnadze's plans for Abkhazia and tacitly approved of the attempt to keep Abkhazia firmly under the control of Tbilisi (just as Shevardnadze later supported Yeltsin's parallel folly in Chechnia), it is hardly surprising that since Georgia's entry to the CIS (a move loathed by most ordinary Georgians as a result of their antipathy to everything Russian) Moscow and Tbilisi have tended to act in concert with regard to Abkhazia -- hence the inhuman blockade imposed since January 1996, uncriticised and thus supported by Western governments and organisations. Everyone concerned with human and minority rights should be screaming in the ear of their elected representatives about this connivance in a brazen attempt to deprive an entire nation of their right to survival on their own territory, but instead, if anyone hears about Abkhazia, it is in terms of 'Abkhazian separatism' and the need to preserve the territorial integrity of Georgia, even though Abkhazia was only incorporated within the administrative frontiers of the Soviet Georgian Republic as recently as 1931 by decision of that well-known social benefactor, Joseph Stalin, who just happened to be himself a Georgian!

At the time of the last Soviet census (1989) there were 93,267 Abkhazians in Abkhazia (17.8%) and 239,872 Kartvelians (45.7%). Most of these were Mingrelians, and they lived most compactly in the southernmost province of Gal, bordering Mingrelia proper. When the war ended, huge numbers of Abkhazia's Kartvelians followed their fellow-fighters in flight over the border into Mingrelia (some over the mountains into Svanetia). However, by no means all left. And so, there can be NO justification for saying that even 250,000 (let alone the oft-repeated figure of 350,000) fled. The absolute maximum figure for such refugees will have been 200,000 and is likely to have been less. These sad individuals were not deliberately forced to leave, as our old friend 'received wisdom' (and Pipes) would have it, but left BEFORE the arrival of troops from the Abkhazian alliance. It is, thus, impermissible to describe their act of abandoning their homes as 'expulsion' (after Pipes) or 'ethnic cleansing' (after almost everyone else). According to a statement by Abkhazia's Foreign Ministry of 6th January 1997 'in view of the stabilising of the situation in the Gal District, a spontaneous return of refugees began there. The Abkhazian side took no measures to impede this process. On the contrary, we several times approached the UNHCR and Russian Foreign Ministry requesting a start to the registration of the returned refugees in order to confirm our assent to their return. However, even this initiative of ours found no support. We then undertook our own registration of the returned refugees. At the present time about 80% of the refugees have returned to the Gal District'. Since so many of Abkhazia's Mingrelians lived in Gal and since 80% are back, nothing like even 200,000 refugees from Abkhazia can be left in Georgia proper.

Of course, one does not know how many Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Russian and Abkhazian refugees there are, having been forced to leave Abkhazia either during the war or afterwards (because of the difficulties created by the ongoing blockade). Perhaps this explains the figure of 75,000 Abkhazians mentioned by Goltz in his own response to Pipes, for even after the deaths incurred during the war there will be over 95,000 ethnic Abkhazians resident on former Soviet soil (most of these inside Abkhazia) -- estimates for Abkhazians in Turkey reach as high as 500,000.

The whole of the above was occasioned by no more than half a dozen lines of superficial comment on the problem of Abkhazia by Pipes. As an illustration of how easily romantic nonsense relating to Georgia can find its way into the pages of the

British press, consider the following, which appeared on the letters' page of The Times (22nd March):

ANCIENT BASQUE LINKS WITH GEORGIA

'Sir, Your report (March 20) linking the Basque language with Etruscan, and your leading article affirming that Basque has no known link with any other language, is misleading, nor does it follow that Basque origins must be sought only in Africa.

'The Ancient Greeks recognised a second Iberia, coexisting near the Caucasus in modern Georgia. Recall, too, "The Hyrcanian cliffs Of Caucasus and dark Iberian dales" (Milton "Paradise Regained", iii, 318), or: "You enter into the Iberians' region, who are separated from the Albanois by the river Alazon, which runneth downe from the Caucasian hills" (Pliny i, 119, in Holland's translation, cited by the "Oxford English Dictionary"). (Ibayerri in Basque means "the country of the river").

'In the Stalin era the Georgian philologist Aleksander Kiknadze catalogued more than 360 words indetical or very similar in the Georgian and Basque languages, such as those for people, mountain crests, wheels and grain. The Russian biologist and botanist Nikolay Vavilov (d.1943) found that Basque wheat was similar to a Georgian variety, unmatched anywhere else.

'Moreover, the syntax and grammatical structure of the two languages are alike, and anthropologists have traced further resemblances in folk music and dances and in family customs and traditions. The clincher was the unearthing in Bilbao of the Iberian Tablet, which defied decipherment until the Georgian Shota Khvevelidze, who had studied ancient Georgian, was called in. After much study, he translated the text: "In the year 4100 the earth heaved with a mighty roar. The wise Rio reminded his countrymen that this had happened once before, when part of the Iberian land was swallowed up. It was therefore imperative to leave and follow the sun's course. Rio managed to collect several hundred thousand people and headed in the direction of the sunset. There they found a new homeland..."

'In Basque tradition legends also tell how their ancestors came from the east at a time of "a giant battle between fire, earth, and water". Kiknadze suggests that this could have coincided with the cataclysm that overwhelmed the Minoans in Crete c.1500BC.

'It would be quite within expectations that the Caucasian Iberians would have left clues, as in Tuscany, of their migration west.

'From Gerald Stonehill, One The Boltons, London SW10 (March 20)'.

In response the present writer penned the following:

'Sir, Just as Nature abhors a vacuum, so linguists have an aversion to language-isolates. Hence their striving to find congeners for Basque, Etruscan, Georgian (forming with its three sister-languages Svan, Mingrelian, and Laz, the Kartvelian family), Burushaski in the Himalayan foothills, and Ainu in North Japan (or even Japanese itself).

'That the Græco-Roman world knew two Iberias was coincidental. The Greeks' western 'Iberia' ("Hiberia" in Latin) is linked to today's hydronym "Ebro" (Greek 'Ibe:ros' vs Latin "Hiberus"), whilst the origin of the eastern Iberia/Iveria [or Georgia, inland from Colchis] is unclear but is plausibly connected with the Old Armenian expression "i virs" 'to/among the Georgians'.

'Distinguished scholars, such as Frenchman René Lafon or Mingrelian Arnold Chikobava, long tried to demonstrate parallels between Basque and various of some 40 indigenous Caucasian languages, including Georgian. But, as no-one today seriously believes Georgian/Kartvelian to be related to any of the northern Caucasian tongues (such as Abkhaz and Chechen), what value resides in such hypotheses? Only clearly established systematic sound-correspondences prove genetic relatedness, not 360 similar words (produced by a modern Georgian journalist! -- A. Kiknadze was not a philologist of the Stalin era), speculative decipherments of ancient tablets, or resemblances of grain-species.

'It is not inconceivable that a pre-Indo-European language(-family) might once have ranged between Caucasus and Pyrenees to be split by incoming Indo-Europeans into Caucasian, Tuscan and (west) Iberian pockets, but, given the time-depth and lack of

historical records (though 15 centuries of Georgian material are available), could evidence ever be forthcoming, even if a relationship does exist?

'Establishing origins can be important, but more urgent efforts should be invested in preserving minor and endangered languages such as Basque in Spain, Laz in Turkey, and Svan, Mingrelian and Abkhaz in Georgia itself, before these share the fate of Etruscan.'

This was deemed not worthy of publication! In other words, write a non-scholarly piece suggesting a possible but totally unproven hypothesis that ties Georgians not only with Etruscans and Basques but even places them on (presumably pre-Greek) Crete as the speakers (again presumably) of the language behind the still undeciphered Minoan A script, and you get published. Try to set the record straight with a certain reserve, and your efforts are trashed. Defend your aggressive territorial integrationism by yelling from all international platforms that your territorial integrity is threatened by aggressive separatism, and you are supported to the hilt. Try to point out that the 'aggressive separatism' exists nowhere apart from in the over-inventive imagination of the cunning plaintiff, and you meet with the same rejection on the political front. O tempora, o mores!...

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