

EDGAR O'BALLANCE: *Wars in the Caucasus, 1990-95*. xxviii, 238 pp., incl. 5 maps. London: Macmillan, 1997. £45.

In recent years I have reviewed some seven titles on the Caucasus emanating from the pens of journalists and/or travel-writers. Of these only one (Carlotta Gall and Tom de Waal's 'Chechnya: A Small Victorious War', Pan Original, 1997) proved to be unreservedly recommendable. The difference between this work and the others is that Gall and de Waal concentrated on one specific event, the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-96, much of which they personally chronicled at the time for their respective news-organisations. Their combined account of the conflict itself was supplemented by some essential background-material on Russo-Chechen relations drawn from recognised authoritative sources. The essential failing of the other volumes perhaps stems from the fact that their compass is more (and, thus, too) widely drawn -- viz. the peoples of the Caucasus and their mutual relations (prior to the Chechen war) by Suzanne Goldenberg ('The Pride of Small Nations. The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder', Zed Books, 1994); Chechenia and neighbouring North Caucasian regions (including Abkhazia) by Stephen Smith ('Allah's Mountains', I.B. Taurus, 1998); late-/post-Soviet Caucasian (especially Transcaucasian) conflicts by Charles van der Leeuw ('Storm over the Caucasus', Curzon Press, 1999); the peoples and problems of Georgia by Mary Russell ('Please Don't Call It Soviet Georgia', Serpent's Tail, 1991) and, in two publications, Peter Nasmyth ('Georgia: A Rebel in the Caucasus', Cassell, 1992; 'Georgia. In the Mountains of Poetry', Curzon Press, 1998). The present work belongs with this latter, broad-canvas group and shares the same faults, which also tend to vitiate so many of the reports from this part of the world across the media -- books, written articles or verbal reports should aim to be informative and factual; factual inaccuracies mislead and, thus, items containing them cannot *ex vi termini* be entirely informative (or recommendable). The Caucasus is one of the most complex ethno-linguistic regions in the world, and this complexity can so easily overwhelm. Georgia and its plethora of misfortunes, however, seem to have a particular capacity to perplex outside commentators, as proves to be the case with the present volume.

O'Ballance discusses Azerbaijani-Armenian hostilities (especially over Nagorno-Karabagh), Georgia's wars with the South Ossetians and the Abkhazians, and, of course, Russia's conflict in Chechenia (spelled Chechnya) in this order. There is a general introduction in the preface, which ends with four separate chronological tables (for the USSR, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Chechenia), whilst chapter 1 ('Dissolution of the Soviet Union') presents the general background to the specific disputes treated here. The Azerbaijani-Armenian and the Chechen conflicts are then assigned three chapters each, whereas Georgia's problems are covered in four central

chapters. The final chapter (pp. 220-23) encapsulates a brief 'Retrospect and prospect'. The final temporal reference is to 14 December 1995, and, since the book did not appear until 1997, it is a pity that some space could not have been found during printing for a supplementary account of the final months of the Chechen war, which ended in the summer of 1996. Chapters are divided into numerous, usually quite short sections, each with its own capitalised sub-heading. This gives one the impression of reading a series of (?newspaper-)reports and perhaps is designed to cater for readers with short attention-spans, though some may find it distracting.

There are many praiseworthy observations. The author is one of the few to emphasise the intractable problem for Shevardnadze located in the west Georgian province of Mingrelia (where Georgian's sister-language Mingrelian is spoken and which is the traditional home for the family of the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first democratically elected president of post-Soviet Georgia, whose ousting paved the way for Shevardnadze's post-Soviet return to Georgia). Indeed, in saying of Shevardnadze that he 'had been hoping to persuade the Mingrelians to join him in any fighting against the Abkhazians' (p. 140), O'Ballance comes quite close to following the explanation I have long advanced for the war in Abkhazia, namely that it stemmed from a quite cynical ploy by Shevardnadze, then beset with rebellion amongst local Zviadists (not 'Zviads' or 'Zviadistis'), to try to rally all Kartvelians (sc. Georgians, Mingrelians, Svans and Laz) to his standard against a perceived common foe (the Abkhazians) -- the ploy failed, and the multi-ethnic citizenry of Abkhazia has been paying the price of this disastrous miscalculation ever since. Charges of ethnic cleansing and genocide have been ritualistically made against the Abkhazians since their victory over their Kartvelian opponents at the end of September 1993, but on p. 142 a crucial observation is made about the Abkhazians' retaking of their capital, Sukhum: 'Georgia alleged that Abkhazian soldiers had gone on the rampage and thousands had been killed, but visiting journalists could find little evidence of such atrocities.' The nature of the atmosphere in early post-Soviet Georgia is accurately summed up thus: 'Infuriated, young Georgian nationalists, hungry to retain their own independence, perversely objected to the Abkhazians having theirs.' Readers are reminded (p. 139) of 'the CIA's covert involvement in Georgian affairs' as evidenced by the shooting there in 1993 of operative Fred Woodruff. However, such positive aspects to the book are more than outweighed by the absolute howlers it contains.

Soviet administrative units below the level of the 15 union-republics included *avtonomnye respubliky* 'autonomous republics', such as Abkhazia and Adzharia (not 'Adharia'), and *avtonomnye oblasti* 'autonomous provinces'; unfortunately, O'Ballance employs the term 'oblast' somewhat indiscriminately (and thus confusingly) in the

sense of English 'region' in reference to both. Although I have never personally understood the official post-1930 classification of Mingrelians as 'Georgians' and constantly argue against it, it is not true, as stated on p. 93, that Mingrelians were included as part of the 29.9% non-'Georgian' portion of Georgia's 1989 population. *Pace* the assertion first encountered on p. xiv, Abkhazia has never to this day declared its formal independence from Georgia, and similarly 'the fight with the Abkhazi[an]s' was not 'at its height' (ibid.) when Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in March 1992, for open hostilities only broke out when he himself sent in his rag-bag forces on 14 August 1992, a mere two weeks after Georgia was admitted to the United Nations (with perverse precipitation, as some would contend). The (North West Caucasian) Abkhazians are most assuredly *not* 'ethnic Georgians' (p. 102); as for their religious affiliation, the majority of those still resident in Abkhazia are, to the extent that they adhere to any faith, Christians (just like the vast majority of Ossetes -- cf. the contrary statement on p. 99), and Abkhazia has *never* been a centre of inter-religious strife. Whenever reference is made to either the Confederation of (Mountain) Peoples of the Caucasus or the North Caucasian volunteers who fought alongside the Abkhazians, the epithet 'Muslim' is automatically attached -- though the Ingush, Chechens and neighbouring Daghestanis are well-known devotees of Sunni (cf. p. 163) Islam, the North West Caucasian Circassians are, like the Abkhazians, rather insouciant towards religion, whilst the Confederation has *never* been an essentially religious grouping; and so the constant employment of this epithet is, to say the least, misguided.

Whilst it may conjure up a vivid image for readers unfamiliar with the geography of Tbilisi, the statue of King Vakht'ang Gorgasali [sic!] cannot actually be seen from Rustaveli Prospekt (p. 91). The incident described in paragraph 2 on p. 94 is surely one that occurred in 1978 (not 1988, as stated). Georgian Independence Day is 26 May (not April -- p. 95). Zviad Gamsakhurdia's father was, predominantly, a novelist, whilst the foremost nationalist leader in late 1980s' Georgia (p. 96) was actually another Mingrelian, Merab K'ost'ava (killed in a car-crash in late 1989). The ethnic clashes that took place in Sukhum and Ochamchira in July 1989 were connected with an (illegal) attempt on the part of the Georgians to open in Sukhum a branch of Tbilisi State University, which would then have rivalled the Abkhazian State University, from which all Kartvelians had withdrawn their cooperation as part of the anti-Abkhazian campaign stoked up in the spring by such nationalist opposition-leaders as Gamsakhurdia, K'ost'ava, and (the third also Mingrelian and also now dead) Giorgi Ch'ant'uria. Compare this with: '[A]n Ossete group...published a letter supporting the Abkhazian campaign to open an exclusive Georgian college at the Sukhumi branch of the Georgian State University' (p. 100; cf. also p. 102)! In 1989 the population of Abkhazia was 525,061, of whom 239,872 were Kartvelians (p. 102). The only

elections that took place in Abkhazia in 1991 were held on 22 and 29 September -- 28 Abkhazians, 26 Kartvelians, and 11 others formed the local parliament (p. 103). Georgia's young militia-leader (later Defence Minister) has the surname Q'arq'arashvili (not Karakashvili) (pp. 106ff.). Dagomys is near Sochi, just north of Abkhazia, and not in the Ukraine (p. 119). Abkhazia's 1925 constitution was annulled when Abkhazia's status was reduced to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia in 1931 (not 1978 -- p. 120). One of the excuses offered by Georgian sources for the invasion of Abkhazia was that two Georgian ministers, Roman Gventsadze and Aleksandre K'avsadze, had been kidnapped by Mingrelian Zviadists and were allegedly being held in Abkhazia's Gal District (Abkhazians insist that the hostages were being held on the Mingrelian side of the border) -- compare that with the following garbled nonsense: 'Roman Gventsadze...and ten other officials on a visit to Sukhumi (including Abkhazia Kavsadze, the South Ossetian Chairman) were kidnapped by a group of Abkhazian separatists' (p. 120); the Index even has an entry for 'Kavsadze, Abkhazia!' Gudauta is south (not north) of Gagra (p. 122). The assertion that in August 1992 'Shevardnadze was striving to avoid civil war with Abkhazia' (p. 123) takes us into the realms of surrealism. No General Vladimir Chikovani (p.141) was ever in command of the Abkhazian forces, and, though I could go on listing such factual errors, I think that this is the moment to draw the veil...

When the Meskh(et)ians (actually Sunni Muslims) were deported from south-western Georgia to Uzbekistan in 1944, they are reckoned to have numbered no more than 140,000 (cf. p. 104), though today they may total up to 400,000. When the Chechens were deported, their numbers are thought to have been 400,000, with the Ingush numbering 100,000 (cf. p. 165). In 1989 the Soviet Lezgian population numbered some 466,833, of whom maybe up to 130,000 lived in northern Azerbaijan (cf. p. 63), the rest being found over the border in Daghestan. The population of South Ossetia in 1989 was 98,527, of whom 65,195 were Ossetes (their leader at the time having the surname Kulumbekov -- not Kolumbegov), whereas the total number of Ossetes living in Georgia at that time was 164,055 (cf. p. 99). The total North Ossetian population in 1989 was 632,428, of whom 334,737 were Ossetes (cf. p. 99). The total 1989 Soviet Chechen population was 958,309, of whom 734,501 lived in Checheno-Ingushetia, whilst there were then 235,577 Ingush, of whom 163,711 resided in Checheno-Ingushetia (cf. p. 169). O'Ballance seems to think there is a Caucasian nationality with the designation 'Dagen', who, on p. 164 he asserts, are of Turkic origin -- there is no such ethnos. On p. 163 he assigns both the 18th century Sheikh Mansour and the 19th century Imam Shamil to this mythical group, but Mansour was a Chechen, whilst Shamil was an Avar. Perhaps some misunderstanding based on the Daghestani

Dargwas/Dargins lies at the route of this confusion, though Dargwas/Dargins are North East Caucasian (not Turkic) speakers.

Though the Russian name is spelled 'Georgij', in Georgian we need (today) 'Giorgi' (and thus 'Giorgadze') *passim*. Warlord Dzhaba Ioseliani's group of gunmen were styled 'Mkhedrioni' (not 'Mekhedrioni'). But the book is littered with so many misspellings (especially of proper names) that listing them all would fill up too much space -- I close by pointing out only that, whilst the verb in 'OPON (the Azerbaijani special purpose militia under the authority of the Interior Ministry) compromised about 3000 well-armed security troops' clearly needs altering to 'comprised', it can be retained to describe the cumulative effect of the book's errors on the author's presumed intent (namely, to inform).

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