

VICTOR A. SHNIRELMAN: *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*. Senri Ethnological Studies 57. v + 465 pp. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology. 2001.

The three wars that scarred the Transcaucasus during both the last years of Soviet rule and the early days of flawed independence consequent upon the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse and which remain unresolved at the moment of writing (namely those between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabagh, between Georgians and South Ossetians over South Ossetia, and between Georgians and Abkhazians over Abkhazia) are the focus of this work. However, Shnirelman does not aim, as others have, to present descriptive accounts of the conflicts or to discuss them in relation to the interests of the leading regional powers (Russia, Turkey, Iran). He prefers to contrast the generally accepted body of basic facts about the history of each contested zone with the various arguments advanced over the decades by local writers and/or historians and/or archæologists about their own side's past and the relevance of these to the perceived strengthening of their nation's claim to the respective territory. The reader is almost left with the impression that, whether motivated by plain naivety, centrally imposed ideology, or, most chillingly, the (frequently perverse) demands of local patriotism, many authors whose ideas are discussed in the present work have effected a weird transformation whereby creative writers have all too often become the drivers of local historiography, whilst some of the best examples of fiction are to be found in the textbooks penned by professional historians. Spot the parallels between the cases!

The linguistic affiliations of the peoples concerned must be borne in mind: Armenian is a branch of the Indo-European family, possibly joined by Thracian and Phrygian, languages too poorly attested for certainty; Ossetian is also Indo-European, belonging with Scythian and Alan, its presumed ancestor, to the northern branch of Iranian; Azeri belongs to the Turkic family, closely related to Turkish; Georgian is a South Caucasian (Kartvelian) language with a demonstrable relationship to only three congeners (Mingrelian, Laz and Svan); Abkhaz is a North West Caucasian language, closely related to Circassian and the extinct Ubykh.

Since Armenian and Georgian literatures go back to around the late 4th century, nobody seriously doubts that their speakers have occupied roughly their present-day territories for at least two millennia -- Armenian territory being much reduced following the notorious events in the relevant Turkish vilayets between 1896 and 1915. However, whilst it is widely assumed that the ancient Anatolian tongues Urartian and Hurrian might have been varieties of North East Caucasian, some Armenian writers have suggested an Armenian link for the natives of Urartu, thereby seeking to provide Armenian history with even remoter glory. But Karabagh (part of

the one-time Armenian province of Artsakh) is further to the east, and it is the historical ethnicity of its denizens that is the real bone of contention. Since a linguistically Turkic presence in Transcaucasia is generally believed to have arisen only in the 11th century, the Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanis once argued that linguistic continuity was not as decisive a factor as biological inheritance, claiming that the Azerbaijanis are the descendants of the Caucasian Albanians, the third great Christian power in the Caucasus (along with Armenia and Georgia) in whose domain Karabagh once lay. Whilst little is known of the Caucasian Albanian language, it is thought to have been a form of North East Caucasian -- indeed, a common assumption is that it was a form of the Lezgian branch and may be continued in Udi (confined today to three villages). This hypothesis implies that the Azerbaijani ancestors must have abandoned their original language in favour of Turkic Azeri. However, the power of the linguistic argument was so compelling (and the need to distance Azerbaijanis from the Turks no longer centrally required) that eventually the proposal was introduced that not only the Albanians but, even more absurdly, the Iranian-speaking Scythians and Saka people had spoken a Turkic tongue! If Albanians spoke ancestral Azeri and held Karabagh in their sway, are not the Azerbaijanis its true owners, regardless of how long Armenian has been spoken there?

In order to deprive the Abkhazians of any historical right to Abkhazia a number of Georgians have laboured to disseminate another calumny against historical reality, namely that the original 'Abkhazians' were a Kartvelian tribe ousted by marauding North West Caucasians who descended from the mountains to take over their territory and name some time between the 15th and 17th centuries. This travesty is very widely believed and, most alarmingly, is reported still to be being taught in Georgian schools.

It seems not be appreciated by the propounders of such theories that the wilder the speculation, the weaker their case must be judged.

Chauvinistic argumentation can lead to blatant absurdities. Shnirelman illustrates one such, observing of a Georgian commentator's 1994/95 statements: 'Finally, [Totadze] went so far as to argue that, "while fighting in Abkhazia, the Georgians are not only defending their own land but are also rescuing Abkhazia and the Abkhazian people from disappearing"...To put it differently, the abolition of Abkhazian autonomy, the destruction of the Abkhazian cultural and intellectual heritage, and the killing of Abkhazians were represented as good for the Abkhazian people' (p. 345). Finally, as an example of the sort of outrageous hyperbole often encountered here, Shnirelman notes an assertion of two Ossetian writers about the linguistic affiliation of Christ and his family: '[T]wo other authors, Valerii Khamitsev and Alexander Balaev, claim that the Galileans were Iranian-speaking descendants of the ancient Aryans, "the Israeli Scythians", and that Jesus' mother was "a Scythian". It follows

from this argument that both Jesus Christ and eleven of the Apostles (not Judas) were in fact close relatives of the Ossetians...' (p. 378).

Despite conflicting theories, the truth must lie somewhere, and the Abkhazian and Armenian arguments are the more persuasive to this reviewer. The question of South Ossetia is less clear. However, a linguistic point can be added to Shnirelman's essentially historical perspective. In 1966 the Georgian iranologist, Mzia Andronik'ashvili, wrote a 634-page monograph analysing the numerous Iranian loans in Georgian. Well over 100 of those discussed entered Georgian from Alan-Ossetic and are attested in the oldest Georgian texts, including items like *m-st'ov-ar-i* 'scout' (with Digor root *astæfun* : *æstaft* 'to espy' embedded in the purely Georgian morphological elements *m- -ar-i*). The transmission of such loans surely requires some extended ancient symbiosis between (Alan-)Ossetians and Georgians?

This is a compelling, remarkably well-informed, but unsettling book, demonstrating how fanciful was the (no doubt worthy) idea mooted a few years ago of the EU underwriting a Transcaucasian history to be jointly written by an inter-ethnic group of local scholars! History is clearly a dangerous discipline, and not only in terms of its capacity to stir a nation's emotions -- Azerbaijani Academician Ziya Buniatov and the Russian Professor Yuri Voronov, who strongly advocated the Abkhazian case, were both assassinated.

GEORGE HEWITT

Main Corrigenda

Only the occasional grammatical or semantic infelicity betrays a foreign hand. p.209: M.G. Bgaghba was the cousin (not brother) of Kh.S. Bgaghba; p.210: I.R. Markholia is the same individual as the more frequently mentioned I.R. Marykhuba; p.213: the 2-day war in 1989 took place in July (not June); p.214: strictly speaking, Abkhazia did not formally declare independence until autumn 1999; p.237 et passim: the old Georgian province, now in Turkey, is usually spelled Klarjeti or Klardzheti (not Klargeti); p.268 l.6: ancestors (not descendants); p.279: though it is widely asserted, even among the Abkhazians, that their name for their homeland 'Apsny' is related to the root 'soul', thereby making the country's designation etymologically 'place of the soul', Slava Chirikba has demonstrated that this is false, the more likely derivation being from the root 'die', making the self-designation 'Apswa' literally 'mortal' and the country-name 'place of the mortals'; p.294: Sadz was a dialect of Abkhaz, not an Abkhaz-like language, once spoken around Sochi; p.311: the 1992 London address by the Georgian Foreign Minister took place at Chatham House (not the UK Parliament); p.362: Footnote 3 ascribes to Julian Birch the sharing of a particular view which in fact he merely mentions as one of three possible interpretations; p.388: the Laz speak Laz, not Mingrelian, though the two are extremely close; p.399: the surname of the

Abkhazian president, namely Ardzinba, is derived from the noun *a-ra(d)zn* ა 'silver' -- it does not mean 'gold-worker', which is *a-x'j* ა'j, source of the surname Khiba.