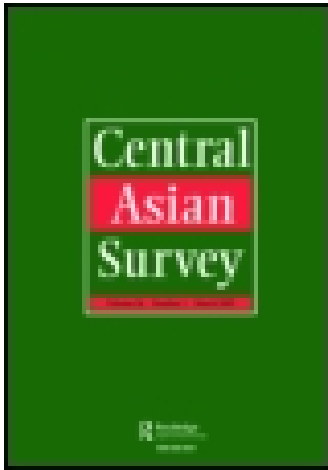


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The making of modern Georgia, 1918-2012: the first Georgian republic and its successors

B. George Hewitt^a

^a SOAS, University of London

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BOOK REVIEW

The making of modern Georgia, 1918–2012: the first Georgian republic and its successors, edited by Stephen F. Jones, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, xxviii + 363 pp., £95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-59238-3

This volume arose out of a 2009 conference (postponed from 2008) celebrating the 90th anniversary of the first Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG, 1918–1921). It begins with a preface by Redjeb Jordania, son of Noë, Georgia's first democratically elected leader, followed by the editor's introduction. Contributions then divide into four parts: (1) Good Neighbors, Bad Neighbors, with five articles by Georgians; (2) Creating Democracy, Building States, with four articles by Georgians; (3) Home for Whom?, with three contributions by non-Georgians; and (4) The Power of the Past, where Ronald Suny's 'The Young Stalin and the 1905 Revolution in Georgia' sits thematically uneasily alongside the others, whilst Malkhaz Toria's closing chapter addresses Soviet Russia's occupation of Georgia (1921) and the 2008 Russo–Georgian war. The appendices give extracts from the 1920 peace treaty with Russia, the never-implemented 1921 DRG constitution, and the 1995 constitution (amended 2006).

Some of the topics examined in various chapters are:

- the structure of the state, and how to establish an ideal and properly functioning democracy in a multi-ethnic context
- the policies and successes/failures of the political leaders, as well as the general aspirations of the people, in the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods
- Georgia's international relations and the influence of neighbouring states (Russia in particular) on the country's destiny
- the economy and economic potential, currently as a Eurasian energy corridor (stressed by Mamuk'a Ts'ereteli, 74–93), though T'arkhan-Mouravi (67) cautions against assuming long-term importance for this transit function, while also alluding to crises in higher education and science (61)
- internal minority rights and relations (with crucial respect to the Abkhazians and South Ossetians), the focus of this review.

The work is welcome for the insights it provides into the thoughts of the authors from Georgia and, more specifically, for revealing a healthy willingness to accept that blame for Georgia's ills cannot always be exclusively laid at an outsider's door. Natalie Sabanadze correctly notes 'a lack of awareness that minority problems in Georgia may have domestic causes too' (123); I would remove the 'may'. See also Giorgi K'andelak'i's critique of the Georgian government's use of military suppression of national minorities as hardly 'exemplary' (171). Nevertheless, the pervasive theme that Russia, Soviet or post-Soviet, has exercised (and continues to exercise) a malign influence on Georgia's development might lead readers to ponder whether excessive self-perception of victimhood could be undermining essential self-criticism. The shortcomings in ex-president Saak'ashvili's policies do not, however, escape censure by authors Alexandre K'ukhianidze (on modernization, 111) and Malkhaz Toria (325 *ff.*).

One could challenge several analyses throughout the book, but I shall limit myself to aspects of the recurring issue of minorities. Cory Welt begins his discussion of the ethnic problems during

the DRG (205–231) by asserting: ‘Today’s Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts can be traced to ... the Russian Revolution of 1917.’ The sad story for Abkhazia begins in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, after the mass exodus of most Abkhazians to Ottoman lands. It was then that Georgian intellectuals started claiming ownership of Abkhazian territory. Whilst Timothy Blauvelt reveals much from the archives on nationality policy in the years 1921–38 (232–61), in one point he errs. The perverse notion that today’s Abkhazians are relatively recent interlopers on ‘Georgian’ soil, replacing the ‘true’ historical Abkhazians (argued to be Kartvelians), may conventionally be known as the Ingoroq’van Hypothesis (after its progenitor P’avle Ingoroq’va), but this distortion cannot be ascribed to ‘later in the 1950s’ (252) after the end of the Stalin-Beria anti-Abkhazian campaigns of 1936–53, as Blauvelt does (254–55). It is true that the book version of Ingoroq’va’s fantasies dates to 1954, but they actually appeared first in issues of the journal *Mnatobi* in 1949–51, when they were suspected of having been written to order ‘academically’ to justify the expulsion of the entire Abkhazian nation planned for the late 1940s. Even so, Ingoroq’va (never an academician!) was only elaborating a theory originally advanced by Georgian historian Dimit’ri Bakradze in his 1889 *History of Georgia*. Thus, Georgian–Abkhazian antipathies were well ingrained before 1917.

Allied to the above is the thorny matter of Abkhazia’s so-called Georgian residents, particularly the historical ethnic identity of those living in the south-eastern region of Samurzaq’ano (roughly today’s Gal District). These are Mingrelians, whom Blauvelt describes in the canonical Georgian fashion as ‘a Georgian ethnic subgroup speaking a Kartvelian language’ (233). Mingrelian ‘ethnicity’ is an extremely sensitive and much-debated issue. With particular reference to the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict, it has been a topic of hot contention since the late nineteenth century and remains important in the context of the ongoing Georgian–Abkhazian stand-off. Abkhazians do not regard Mingrelians as Georgians, and the more those living in Abkhazia cleave to the official Georgian view that they are correctly so categorized, the greater the suspicion with which they will be viewed inside Abkhazia. In footnotes 22 and 23, Welt broaches the question of original Samurzaq’anoan ethnicity (Abkhazians versus Mingrelians) and the crucial changes to the balance in the population percentages depending on their categorization from census to census (227–28). Though Welt alludes to Daniel Müller’s scrupulous 1999 study of Abkhazia’s demographic shifts, Müller assuredly does not agree with Welt’s description of the 1917 Agricultural Census, which recorded Samurzaq’ano as almost exclusively Georgian, as ‘the only reasonably reliable statistic available from this period’ (personal communication). Nowhere in the book is there mention of the Family List of 1886, wherein Abkhazians numbered 28,323 versus 3558 Mingrelians, 515 Georgians, and 30,640 Samurzaq’anoans. With these data compare those from (a) the 1926 *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* (from 1922/23 figures): 83,794 Abkhazians versus 32,039 Georgians (properly Kartvelians), the Samurzaq’anoans being treated as Abkhazians; and (b) the 1926 All-Union Census: 55,918 Abkhazians versus 40,989 Mingrelians and 24,576 Georgians, the Samurzaq’anoans evidently designated Mingrelians. The fact that ‘Georgian’ and ‘Mingrelian’ were separate categories at this time (indeed, up to c. 1930) is significant for any debate on the ethnic classification of the Mingrelians.

Of similar potential interest to readers eager to understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic and associated issues would have been a discussion of moves in the 1920s to grant Mingrelia autonomy (along with literary status for Mingrelian), something championed by then leading Mingrelian politician Ishak’ Zhvania but ultimately quashed by his successor, the Mingrelian Lavrent’i Beria. Again, however, all authors are silent on this sensitive and highly pertinent point. This section closes with Laurence Broers’s ‘Unpacking the Meta-Conflict: Claims to Sovereignty, Self-Determination and Territorial Integrity in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict’ (262–83). The arguments presented by interested parties for or against the three abstractions in the title of the article are presented and critiqued. As for the Gal residents, we read:

The Gali Georgian community has been described by Thomas de Waal as a community ‘with two stepmothers’, one in Sukhumi, the other in Tbilisi and neither truly committed to its well-being. Both ‘stepmothers’ ascribe various motives and attitudes to the Gali Georgian community, which in reality manages a fragile existence in genuinely challenging economic and security conditions. (277)

It is encouraging to read Sabanadze’s recognition of the need to improve majority–minority relations: ‘Georgia has no other option but to democratize its relations with minorities if it is ever to find a sustainable and peaceful *modus vivendi* in the country’ (133). But she also speaks here of state and minority interests’ failing to coincide, whilst several authors write that, at times, minority rights have been subordinated to the perceived needs of national security (see with reference to the DRG, for instance, Malkhaz Matsaberidze, 152, Levan Ramishvili and Tamar Chergoleishvili’s footnote 36 on 198, and Welt, 220). The fact is that a state’s security is best guaranteed if no (ethnic, religious) group within it feels alienated. Given not only the local but also the larger, European-wide chaos in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution, such harmony might have been impossible for the DRG to achieve, as is clear from Welt’s discussion of the complex factors at play in Georgian–Abkhazian and Georgian–South Ossetian relations during the DRG, though I think the conclusions he draws about the relevance of an understanding of the DRG situation to resolving today’s conflicts are over-optimistic. Regardless of events in 1918–21, Tbilisi’s antagonizing the republic’s minorities through an explosion of nationalism as the USSR’s disintegration approached was inexcusable and self-destructive. Abkhazians might themselves today argue that national security trumps respect for the rights of those Kartvelians (essentially Mingrelians concentrated in the Gal and parts of the neighbouring Ochamchira and T’q^w’archal Districts) who have stayed in, or returned to, Abkhazia since the 1992–93 war, but such a view is as flawed as it has been on the part of various Georgian administrations. Whilst Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s reintegration into a Georgian polity, however (re)structured, is surely unthinkable, this volume offers no hint that this reality is acknowledged. But Georgia’s remaining minorities might take reassurance from reading in this essay collection promotion of the need to enshrine their rights in legislation.

There is no holistic bibliography, Routledge house style requiring that references be treated like footnotes, both appearing as chapter endnotes, which makes reading uncomfortable. Hardly any typos were detected, but the garbled attempt to transliterate an Abkhaz book title and publisher in note 19 (259) will mystify even native speakers (read: Ag^wala f^warak^wa ‘*Recollections*’, Aph^wint f^wq^w’tizrta ‘Abkhazian State Publishing House’).

B. George Hewitt

SOAS, University of London

Email: gh2@soas.ac.uk

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