

Language, Nationalism, and the West's Response

Given the welter of pressing problems facing the countries of E. Europe, some may regard discussion of the fate of this or that language to be of trivial importance. One could, of course, examine the Caucasus, especially Georgia, from a number of standpoints -- political, social, economic, etc.. -- but, as a linguist, I have chosen the language-perspective. I hope we can all agree that a language is not merely a vehicle for certain academics to earn their livelihood, such that one or two fewer here or there does not really matter; there is surely such an intimate bond between language and culture, that, if the language disappears, the distinctness of the associated culture must at the very least be threatened. With this in mind, I think there is cause for concern over the likely fate of a number of the 38 (or so) indigenous languages of the Caucasus both generally and specifically in connection with nationalist fever inside Georgia, as I hope to demonstrate.

Apart from various Indo-European and Turkic tongues that have come to be spoken in the Caucasus over the centuries, there are certainly 3 (possibly 4) families that make up the indigenous languages of the region: N[orth] E[ast] C[aucasian] (Avar, Andi, Botlikh, Godoberi, Karata, Akhvakh, Bagval, Tindi, Chamalal, Dido, Khvarsh, Hinukh, Bezhti, Hunzib, Lak, Dargwa, Lezgian, Tabassaran, Archi, Aghul, Rutul, Tsakhur, Budukh, Khinalugh, Udi, Kryts), N[orth] C[entral] C[aucasian] (Chechen, Ingush, Bats), N[orth] W[est] C[aucasian] (West and East Circassian, Abkhaz, Abaza, Ubykh), S[outh] C[aucasian] or Kartvelian (Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz, Svan) -- the difficulty of differentiating between dialect and language accounts for why the total of 38 is only approximate. Today Ubykh, spoken only in Turkey since 1864, is virtually extinct, whilst the others have speakers varying in number from 200 (as reported by E.A. Bokarëv in 1967) for Hinukh upto four million for Georgian, the only one with (a) over even one million speakers, (b) its own unique script, and (c) a literary tradition (actually of 15 centuries) pre-dating the 19th century. With a number of these languages being spoken by inhabitants of just a cluster of neighbouring villages, conditions were/are ripe for the development of bi-, tri-, and quadri-lingualism -- Adolf Dirr (1867-1930) described his informant for both Archi and Aghul as also competent in Lak, Avar, Kumykh, Russian and Arabic. The

existence of naturally developed *linguae francae* will have played a part in the decisions as to which languages were to be accorded literary status in the early Soviet campaign towards eradicating illiteracy. The current literary languages are underlined in the above-list -- efforts to establish literatures for NEC Akhvakh, Tsakhur, Udi and SC Laz failed; for Mingrelian see below. Thus, many of the small peoples of Daghestan (NE Caucasus), like the Botlikh, in addition to their own language use Avar (or Russian, of course) for literary purposes; the Aghul have Lezgian, Dargwa or Tabassaran as inter-communal languages. However, a negative interpretation of Soviet treatment of the N. Caucasian languages is offered by R. Wixman in his **Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus** (1980). His general thesis is summed up by one reviewer, Bernard Comrie, thus: "The establishment of new written languages for many of the peoples of the North Caucasus in the early post-Revolutionary years was an attempt to wean them away from other loyalties (e.g. to Arabic or a Turkic lingua franca); now that this aim has been at least in part achieved, these written languages are being phased out in favor of Russian." Comrie himself, though, dismisses Wixman's theory partly on the grounds that the Soviets cannot win -- "if the Soviet authorities encourage a language, it is to divide and rule; if they discourage a language, it is to Russianize and unite" -- and partly by adducing counter-evidence from other regions of the USSR. N.W. Caucasian specialist Rieks Smeets (1984.59-60) could hardly differ more from Wixman: "It is hardly feasible to find a more positive aspect of Soviet internal policy than the policy towards ethnic minorities. This policy is on the whole to be applauded." On the whole, I rather incline towards this latter view. Quite simply, in modern conditions of a tendency to migrate from rural areas to urban centres and particularly of mass-communication (and entertainment) by means of broadcasting, which in the USSR is primarily in Russian with local alternatives in the shape of the respective union-republican languages, I believe that the long-term future for minority-languages can only stand even a chance of being safe-guarded if they are awarded some level of literary status. Recent reports suggest that as a result of local initiatives some teaching of Rutul, Tsakhur and Aghul has already started (Rieks Smeets and Simon Crisp -- personal communication).

Wixman, of course, questions whether the title 'literary language' still has any real significance in the N. Caucasus. Literary status basically implies (a) publishing (of books, journals, newspapers), (b) schooling in the language upto a certain grade in local-language schools, and (c) some amount of radio- and TV-broadcasting (possibly for just a negligible amount of time per week). Regarding (a), Wixman dismissively states: "One cannot call a language in which fewer than 100 different books are printed per year 'literary'" (p.157). Regarding (b), he concludes: "It is clear from current educational policies that there is now an attempt to completely replace native languages of the N. Caucasus, at least in terms of their use as literary languages, with the Russian tongue" (p.155). He has in mind the School Reform of 1959, concerning which he quotes Robert Conquest (**The Nation Killers**): "The language issue is essentially that of making the language of instruction voluntary from the parents' point of view... In effect this means that ambitious parents try to get their children into Russian language schools, which are in any case of higher quality" (p.149). It may well be true that the effect here has been that in some areas there no longer exist local-language schools, i.e. schools where tuition for the first few grades is actually in the local language, and that where such teaching has survived, there is a switch to Russian after grade 2 -- I believe literary languages are still taught as a discipline within regional Russian schools regardless -- but I think Wixman's judgment on publishing is too severe. It would obviously be foolish to claim that all is well even for the literary languages of the N. Caucasus -- evidence is available that both NEC Avar (Simon Crisp's unpublished doctoral thesis) and NWC West Circassian (Olga Lalor's unpublished doctoral thesis) are being squeezed in terms of their functional viability -- but I see the problem more as one of accidental neglect than deliberate open hostility on the part of the (Russian) authorities, though I could of course be wrong and remain open to persuasion; I am, for instance, told (Rieks Smeets -- personal communication) that the Academy authorities have a central policy not to fund all publications relating to the non-literary languages, with the result that the Bezhti-Russian dictionary that exists in manuscript-form is unlikely to appear. If true, this is indeed a matter for regret.

In the case of the already established literary languages, the basis is there for a revival. Assuming that the N. Caucasian territories will remain part of some continuing RSFSR either in the guise of today's mixture of autonomous regions and republics or conceivably as a reconstituted Mountain Caucasian Republic, it is likely that in the prevailing climate of self-awareness and self-determination the various peoples themselves will soon start to claim their ethnic/linguistic rights, and, as Soviet society opens up to further contact with the West, academic bodies and cultural organisations here should encourage the relevant authorities to facilitate the re-invigoration of the minority languages and cultures. A campaign to remind people of the importance of re-introducing and/or strengthening the local languages in education would have to be accompanied by measures to improve the quality of teaching in the relevant schools to ensure at least the same standards as in Russian schools. This almost certainly would have to be accompanied by radical improvements to the primers already in existence both for the local languages themselves as well as for disciplines taught in them. Linguists would have to be involved to ensure that the local languages were endowed with technical vocabularies appropriate to both the relevant subjects and adequate for the level to which these subjects were to be taught. New scripts might even have to be devised. All this would take effort, time and money. Since the Soviet economy today is in many ways as parlous as it was in the early days when many of the literary languages were first created and when, differently from today, there existed the pressing need to eradicate illiteracy, it would be understandable if these concerns were not exactly accorded top priority for funding. But if all interested parties (the local peoples, the relevant authorities, and Western institutions) agreed that such a project should be undertaken, could not funding be targetted by appropriate sources from the West?

As to the more numerous non-literary languages, I am convinced that, unless some sort of albeit elementary provision is made for underpinning them at nursery and primary schools, there is just no way they are going to survive, given the demands of modern life and the all-intrusive influence of television with its major language (Russian). I was delighted that in the paper he had hoped to read on behalf of himself and his collaborator R. Radzhabov at the Vth

Caucasian Colloquium at London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in June 1990 the distinguished Russian caucasologist M. Alekseev himself argued the case for provision to be created for the NEC Dido language (population = 8,500). This generous attitude is to be contrasted with that obtaining in the Transcaucasian Republic of Georgia, to which we now turn our attention.

Georgia presents a complex picture. It incorporates the NWC literary language Abkhaz, which was included in his book by Wixman even though it is not spoken in what is geographically the N. Caucasus, the non-literary NCC Bats and SC Mingrelian, Svan and Laz (spoken by only a negligible number within Georgia since the traditional Laz homeland falls today inside Turkey's borders), as well as a variety of other languages which are also spoken elsewhere within the USSR (including Ossetic, Azeri, Armenian, Russian, Ukrainian, Avar, Udi and Greek). The position of Georgian's sister-languages is particularly intriguing.

In the 1926 Soviet census 242,990 declared Mingrelian nationality (with a further 40,000 stating Mingrelian to be their native language); 13,218 described themselves as Svans -- figures quoted from Wixman. Today there are no precise figures for the numbers of Mingrelians and Svans or for those having first- or second-speaker knowledge of these languages. Sometime around 1930 it seems to have been decided that these people were simply to be classified as "Georgians", and the result is that, since all Svans and virtually all Mingrelians educated during the Soviet period have studied in Georgian-language schools, most are apparently happy to call themselves "Georgians" today. Within the Georgian language although there is the term kartveluri 'Kartvelian' to describe the family to which the four SC languages belong, the equivalent human adjective (*kartveleli) does not (yet!) exist, and so the term kartveli 'Georgian' is used instead. There is no excuse for continuing this terminological inaccuracy in English, where 'Kartvelian' should be used to refer generically to any of the four peoples, whilst 'Georgian' be properly reserved for the largest of the four. Introduction of the designation *kartveleli into the Georgian language would provide a rough equivalent to the term 'British', leaving the ethnonyms kartveli, megreli, svani and lazi free to play the same roles as the terms 'English', 'Scots', 'Welsh' and 'Irish' in the British Isles.

To those who charge that foreigners have no right to involve themselves in questions of a people's ethnic self-awareness or, by so doing, that they are essaying the dismemberment of Georgia in pursuance of the imperialist slogan 'Divide and Rule', I reply that to my mind it is as absurd to call a Mingrelian a Georgian as it would be to call an Englishman a German on the superficial grounds that both languages have a common ancestor (Proto-Germanic) and the Germans are the more numerous race! In addition to such a historical linguistic argument, proponents of the pan-Georgian concept also allude to Georgian having been the only literary and Church-language that the Mingrelians (and Svans) have ever had (see Itonishvili 1990:19). To this one merely has to respond by asking what relevance the existence of Georgian as a written language had over the centuries prior to the introduction of universal education in the Soviet period for the great mass of Mingrelians and Svans (and Georgians for that matter), who were quite simply illiterate. The fact the leaders of these societies evidently also spoke Georgian is reminiscent of 19th century aristocratic Russians choosing to speak amongst themselves in French rather than Russian as a mark of their social superiority. The 17th century Italian Don Giuseppe Judice was surely correct when he wrote that, although Mingrelian is a distinct language, the Mingrelians "read sacred and secular books in Georgian and conduct services in Georgian, just as Europeans judge Latin to be the language of the Church" (pp.92-3 of the 1964 Georgian edition). It is a pity that this simple truth eludes many Kartvelian commentators today! Do we, as interested outsiders, not have the right to investigate and discuss how the prevailing attitude might have developed, if for no other reason than that we might be worried about what would appear to be the deliberate neglect of these languages and their associated cultures?

Though this is not the place to examine in detail the history of such topics, allusion to the debate about the need for a Mingrelian literary language is instructive insofar as the arguments advanced against it are still being forcefully repeated today. A most revealing article on the subject appeared in **Literary Georgia** on 3rd November 1989, written by none other than the then leading radical, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who is now the elected president of Georgia and himself a Mingrelian. This article deserves to be translated and widely disseminated for the benefit of those who do

not read Georgian, since, like so many of the outpourings from the nationalists in Georgia, it will surely strike the alert reader as actually supporting the case it seeks to damn. The target of this piece is the most prominent local Mingrelian Bolshevik politician of the 20s and 30s, Isak Zhvania, and those like him either earlier or later who argued that Mingrelian should indeed have literary status (and even that Mingrelia should be autonomous). It is clear that, apart from the fully to be expected opposition from Georgians, such moves have always been opposed by the very leaders of Mingrelian society themselves (e.g. T. Zhordania in the late 19th century, and in the 1920s both T. Sakhokia and Zviad's father, Konstantine, whom many judge to be the greatest 20th century prose-writer in Georgian). The elder Gamsakhurdia wrote the following in response to the publication of a brochure 'Red Ray' in Mingrelian in the 20s: "Such an anti-Georgian event that spells doom for the Georgian language has not happened in Georgia for many a long year... The dark hand of Romanov Russia set out to reduce the confines of the Georgian language and nation and to consign Georgian culture to eternal backwardness." A similar attitude was found by Wixman amongst contemporary N. Caucasian leaders, of whom he says (p.207): "The native intelligentsia looked upon their own people as backward, 'inferior' groups." Thus we stumble upon a rather interesting circumstance that has evidently escaped the notice of the younger Gamsakhurdia. He is fond of exhorting his minions in his anti-Abkhazian rhetoric to remind the Abkhazians of the fate of their cousins, the Ubykhs, by which he means that, since it was by Tsarist Russia that this nation was forced out of their Caucasian homeland to settle in Turkey in 1864, the Abkhazians will better protect their future by throwing in their lot with those who aspire to an independent Georgia than by looking to the Kremlin for support. In fact, once the Ubykhs settled in Turkey their leaders took a conscious decision that, in addition to Turkish, it was more important they teach their children the language(s) of their relatives and (even in exile still) more numerous neighbours (viz. Circassian or, less commonly, Abkhaz) than their own Ubykh, with the result that octogenarian Tevfik Esenç is the only surviving speaker of the language today. It is, thus, rather the Mingrelians who should be reminded of the fate of the Ubykhs, insofar as a language is here shewn to be ultimately fatally wounded if it not merely lacks the

support but attracts the actual antagonism of its own leading lights, such as both the elder and younger Gamsakhurdias. It is fascinating, if futile, to speculate that, had the Ubykhs chosen to remain under Tsarist control, their language might well have been granted literary status along with Circassian, Abkhaz and Abaza in the 1920s!

When stripped of its Marxist phraseology, it is Zhvania's view which strikes me as the more compelling in the debate over the "Mingrelian Question", though he ultimately failed to convince the Georgian Stalin and the best known of all Mingrelians, Lavrenti Beria, who, according to Zviad, had him liquidated in 1937 -- according to the Georgian Encyclopædia, however, Zhvania died in 1946. It is obviously for the Mingrelians to decide whether they desire any form of regional autonomy or independence, but for the sake of securing a continuing viability for Mingrelian (and Svan), I maintain that some provision must be made for elementary teaching and publishing in the language(s). Is this likely? It must be obvious from what I have already said that it is not. In all the years I have been discussing the matter not a single Georgian (or even Mingrelian or Svan) linguist has ever expressed to me any anxiety for the well-being of either tongue. The complacent attitude: "As long as a single Mingrelian or Svan is left on this earth, both languages will survive" (Zurikela, writing in **Young Communist** 5th August 1989) seems to prevail. The lack of prestige attaching to these languages, which many linguistically naive Kartvelians still regard as mere dialects of Georgian, has the consequence that native speakers themselves can come to disrespect their own mother-tongue -- the now deceased but then 80 year-old mother of my main Mingrelian informant, who herself knew hardly any Georgian, was fond of asking in 1982: "Mingrelian is of no use even to us Mingrelians, so what need has this Englishman of it?" This phenomenon is well known to sociolinguists as Linguistic Insecurity, and it can only be reinforced by such revealing jibes as that described by Nodar Dzhodzhua in the article he published in the Russian-language Abkhazian paper **Edinenie** in July 1990. He observes that in E. Georgia, especially Tbilisi, a common way of belittling or disparaging someone is to say to them: "Are you a Mingrelian or something?!" When a Mingrelian dares to stick his head above the ramparts and speak out against the pan-Georgian doctrine, they are immediately lambasted in the Georgian press. Apart from Dzhodzhua,

another example was Vano Dgebuadze, who wrote in 1989: "I recall -- it was 1938. Some teacher came to school and transformed my surname in the school-journal from [Mingrelian -- BGH] Dgebia to [Georgian -- BGH] Dgebuadze. So, in a single village, Saberio, there appeared two transcriptions of a single name -- in school Dgebuadze, at home Dgebia. Not only that, one brother (the uneducated one) was Dgebia, the other (educated) one was Dgebuadze." Statements such as these reveal that there is evidently a degree of dissatisfaction with their lot amongst certain Mingrelians, though one cannot be sure how widespread this may be. It is not surprising that few risk speaking out when one considers the normal reaction -- no detail (true or fabricated, as I can personally testify!) from your private life is safe from being disclosed in lurid newspaper-articles in an attempt to besmirch you and, supposedly thereby, to discredit your opinions. How may one explain the virulent reaction which mention of this manifestly sensitive subject engenders (as in the work by Itonishvili alluded to above)? It is at this point that we come finally to the issue of nationalism.

One prominent specialist on Soviet affairs from London's School of Soviet and East European Studies (SSEES) stated on television in 1990 that in his opinion nationalism was not always necessarily a bad thing. By this I imagine he meant that, when a nation's actions are motivated by a principled stand in defence of its linguistic, cultural, political or territorial integrity against threats from some hostile or dominating power, such actions may be deemed noble, for this is a kind of patriotism. Viewed in this light, the tenacity with which Georgians have clung to their language and culture through centuries of danger from Arab, Turkish, Mongol, Persian and Tsarist Russian oppression could be interpreted as making just such a virtue out of nationalism. And although I have argued elsewhere (1985 & 1989) that the Soviet period has witnessed a consolidation of the Georgian language, albeit within the stultifying confines of communist ideology -- as the language of a union-republic education from nursery through university is not just available but actually pursued by almost all Georgians (Kartvelians) -- if the Georgians themselves perceive a threat from The Centre, they have every right to rally support, speak out and take appropriate measures. But I regard it as just unacceptable when attempts are made to safeguard Georgian language and culture at the expense of smaller languages and

cultures within Georgia. Now in 1989 there were 3,983,115 "Georgians" (i.e. Kartvelians) in the USSR, 3,787,393 of whom live in Georgia, making up 70.1% of the republic's population. If we reduce this figure by (as many would claim) upto one million Mingrelians, the reasons for sensitivity perhaps become a little clearer -- the 40,000 or so Svans and the perhaps 6,000 Bats, who, incredible though it be, are also classified as "Georgians", are unimportant by comparison; the percentage of Georgians in Georgia's population is considerably reduced, and, the fear must be, doubts might arise as to whether the Georgians are really entitled to all the territory incorporated within Georgia today. Indeed, Dgebuadze stated this unambiguously in his letter: "As is well known, the Georgians because of their small numbers, and in order not to lose the Republic of Georgia, classified all Mingrelians as well as the Svans...as Georgians so as to increase their numbers."

But I believe a further observation might be pertinent at this point. Though no-one can deny the long history and vitality of Georgian language and culture as well as the illustrious role played in Caucasian history by the Georgians, who attained their greatest power and influence under Queen Tamar (1184-1213), the consequence of the Mongol invasions was that Georgia became fragmented into often rival principalities. This means that the concept of Georgia as a modern nation-state is no older than a mere 100 years, when such prominent citizens as Prince (now Saint) Ilia Chavchavadze worked so hard to instill this sense of unity across all the regions inhabited by the various Kartvelian tribes (apart from the Laz of Lazistan in Turkey). At a time of disillusion, malaise and disintegration under Tsarist Russian rule, this can be regarded as a noble endeavour. But it nevertheless follows that the nation has had no time to mature and to come to terms with its own identity. When one considers the decidedly unfavourable conditions that have characterised Georgia's last 100 years, the combination of worries about its size and its national immaturity (sc. as a nation-state) gives rise to an underlying national lack of self-confidence (not to say paranoia) which perhaps goes a long way to explaining the delicacy of the issue we are examining, particularly at this crucial moment when the only thought seems to be of the independence that is not only assumed to be within their grasp but which has already been declared (9th April 1991).

The above notwithstanding, the fact remains that **all** minorities are deserving of respect. If the Georgians are viewed as a minority struggling for freedom within the context of the USSR as a whole, the Georgians' legitimate rights deserve no higher privilege than those of Georgia's minorities -- this understanding was surely behind the late A. Sakharov's assessment of Georgia as a minor empire in *Ogonëk* (July 1989). No-one is advocating a declaration of war on Tbilisi to defend the Mingrelian and Svan languages, but I see nothing wrong in urging all those who visit Georgia or who have a voice there (scholars, politicians, businessmen, representatives of Tbilisi's twin-cities of Bristol and Atlanta or of Kutaisi's twin-city of Newport, as well as tourists) to keep on stressing in their dealings with Georgians that the best way for them to win and keep friends both at home and abroad is to shew due respect and generosity to the minority-languages and cultures within Georgia, starting with Mingrelian, Svan and Bats. It need not necessarily follow that the sort of tolerance I am proposing would result in separatist-movements developing in Mingrelia and Svanetia or that their speakers would thereby be cut off from Georgian culture. Re-invigorated Mingrelians and Svans would surely be only too happy to keep up their bilingualism in a future Georgia wherein the majority Georgian population properly looked after the interests of all of Georgia's peoples.

Some may point out that for the 1989 census all restrictions on self-designation were removed, and the fact that vast numbers of Mingrelians and Svans do not appear in the results shews that these peoples have no qualms about viewing themselves as "Georgians". So, if they are not worried, why am I "meddling" in these affairs? Everyone knows how regimented the Soviet peoples have been during their membership of the Union. When Mingrelians and Svans have been told for 60 years that they are "Georgians", continuation of this self-description in 1989 is hardly surprising. I can reveal from anecdotal evidence that ethnic enrolment in the 1989 census caused considerable disquiet amongst at least some of Abkhazia's Mingrelian community. There are reports of people asking the census-officer if there would be any repercussions were they to register themselves as Mingrelians. Incidentally, is it general policy for these forms to be completed in pencil, as happened in Abkhazia in both 1979 and 1989? I was also told of a visit by representatives of the then prominent

Rustaveli Society to the headmaster of a Russian school in Abkhazia in order to urge him to persuade the parents of Mingrelian pupils at his school to transfer them to Georgian schools. He said that this was no business of his, at which point the representatives asked for the addresses of the relevant families so that they could deal with the matter themselves. The sinister implication here is, sadly, all too typical of current events in Georgia that are slowly but surely starting to be reported by the Western media.

We come now, however, to one of the nastiest aspects of modern chauvinism (to call a spade a spade) in Georgia, which has already caused much trouble within the republic and which should be viewed with alarm by all who regard the protection of minorities as a worthy cause -- the situation in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, which has many parallels with that obtaining in Georgia's Autonomous Region of South Ossetia, the autonomous status of which was abolished by Gamsakhurdia in December 1990. In a remarkably daring article by railwayman Sergo Panculaia (another Mingrelian, according to the form of his surname!) and published in **Trud** (27.1990) he perceptively observes: "By the way, it was only when the issue of the state-language came on the agenda that nationalism exploded in the republic." What is the significance of this observation? There is, unhappily, a long and sad history of tension between the Abkhazians and their Kartvelian neighbours, which goes back, in modern times at any rate, to the already mentioned migration of many N. Caucasians to the Ottoman Empire in 1864 -- there are numerous Abkhazians today in Turkey. This partial evacuation of their territory led to competition for rights to fertile land along this stretch of the Black Sea coast with its favourable climate, which lends it today such potential for rich pickings from the lucrative tourist-trade. There is no time here to detail the history of this conflict -- for convenient sources in English reference may be made to the relevant articles in **Index on Censorship** (January 1990) and **The Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle** (March 1990). Suffice it here to say that the repression suffered in Abkhazia under Beria and his successors in Tbilisi from 1933 to 1953 is especially significant to an appreciation of current difficulties since it not only included mass-importations of Kartvelians and others in order to reduce the Abkhazian percentage of the population but also saw the closure of Abkhaz-language schools as well as both the prohibition of teaching of Abkhaz and restrictions

on publishing in it from 1944 to 1953 (*mutatis mutandis* the same restrictions were applied in S. Ossetia) with children being simply transferred to Georgian-language schools -- this rather crucial fact is strangely not mentioned by Wixman. Ever since then the Abkhazians have been particularly concerned about safeguarding their language and stress the struggle they have had to achieve other advances such as access to broadcasting and the creation of the so-called Abkhazian State University in Sukhum in 1978 (N.B. the largest of the three sectors was always the Georgian one at about 40%, although Kartvelian propaganda always talks of this university in such a way as to lead the innocent reader into the erroneous belief that it was established solely to cater for the Abkhazians, who thus, the imputation goes, can have no justification for their claim of cultural repression) -- these concessions followed the request to secede from Georgia and join the RSFSR. By June 1988 an 87-page document, the so-called *Abkhazian Letter*, signed by 60 leading Abkhazians and prepared in the early heady days of *perestroika*, was ready for submission to the Kremlin seeking restoration of the union-republican status enjoyed by Abkhazia from 1921 to 1931. Then towards the end of 1988 the Georgians published the draft of the **State Programme for the Georgian Language**, which advocated the obligatory teaching of Georgian in all schools in the republic -- the final version promulgated in August 1989 adds that access to higher education in Georgia will be dependent on passing a test in Georgian language and literature. Thus, it was abundantly clear that, following this, there would be even more trouble, for Georgian is poorly known amongst Abkhazians, apart from those who had it forced on them in the years 1944-1953. This may come as a surprise to many people, but it is entirely natural for the following reason: for a number of years Georgian, Russian, Armenian, Azeri, Ossetic, Abkhaz and Avar schools have been operating in respective parts of Georgia. In non-Georgian schools Georgian has always been an optional subject, Russian obligatory, since knowledge of Russian is essential for inter-communal intercourse throughout the Union. Within Abkhazia Georgian is little heard for the simple reason that there are relatively few Georgians resident there -- although Kartvelians make up 45.7% of the population, almost all of these are Mingrelians, who still tend to speak Mingrelian amongst themselves. Those Abkhazians who live in close contact with Mingrelians (i.e. the southern Abkhazians) have

tended to speak this Kartvelian language, with Russian as their third tongue -- today Russian occupies second position, Mingrelian a definite third -- whereas in the north of the region Abkhaz and Russian generally suffice. If Georgian is not deemed necessary for purposes of day-to-day life, who is willingly going to study it? To make it obligatory in all republican schools, regardless of local circumstances and merely to satisfy the pride of the Georgians is just to invite hostility, because under prevailing conditions, where Russian remains essential and will remain essential as long as Abkhazia (and/or Georgia proper) stays within the Union, the casualty will in the long run be Abkhaz (or Ossetic, as the case may be). The **State Programme for the Georgian Language** was a blunder of the first magnitude -- it makes no mention of provision for any other of the many languages spoken in Georgia, as would surely have been expected from a worthy leadership aware of its responsibilities to all of the republic's peoples. When the S. Ossetian organisation **Adæmon Næxas** 'Popular Shrine' complains of just this omission as a principal cause of alarm, it is no good people like Roman Miminoshvili reacting in November 1989 (**Literary Georgia** 17th Nov p.4) with such withering remarks as: "In the **Programme** there is nothing said about co-operatives, and no single mention is made of the increase in the hole in the ozone over Antarctica; there is talk only of the Georgian language -- so what?" The problem lies precisely in this restriction and the short-sightedness which caused it! In two issues from 1989 **The Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle** included translations of the parallel documents from the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan. As both the translations themselves and the discussion appended thereto make clear, the Uzbekistan law is much more liberal and generous in its attitude to the rights of local non-Uzbeks and their languages than the Tadzhikistan equivalent and for this reason apparently gave rise to much criticism within certain Uzbek circles. However, the drafters of even the Tadzhiki document saw fit to incorporate certain rights for the local non-Tadzhikis and their languages. In the Georgian programme, on the other hand, ONLY the needs of Georgian are addressed.

This **Programme** cannot, of course, be viewed in isolation. The inexorable rise through 1987-88 of more and more unofficial groups, taking ever more extreme stands on the national question with slogans

such as 'Georgia for the Georgians [sc. Kartvelians -- BGH]!' has continued to this day, so that, as my colleague Donald Rayfield has observed, even the most respectable (i.e. least reactionary) party, The National/Popular Front, does not balk at suggesting that Georgian citizenship should be available only to those who have a command of Georgian, a policy adopted by nationalists in other republics (as noted by Mike Kirkwood), where, to my mind, it is just as unacceptable. A notorious article by Revaz Mishveladze in **Young Communist** (29th July 1989) proposed that Georgia should tolerate only 5% of "guests" (i.e. non-Kartvelians) on its territory, and as recently as the 7th September 1990 poetess Medea Kakhidze writes in **Literary Georgia** (p.4): "I hate no-one, but I firmly believe that everyone should live in his own homeland", noting that one of the Avar villages in Kakheti (E. Georgia), Txilistsqaro, has already been vacated -- the residents clearly preferred the peace of Daghestan to continuing pressure from Georgian nationalists. Why should this last be viewed with concern in Abkhazia? The response to the Abkhazian Letter and the subsequent Lykhny Declaration (March 1989) was explosive. There was no attempt to ask whether there might be some justification to the dissatisfaction with their treatment from Tbilisi over recent decades¹ -- regardless of their constant bickering over other questions, the whole plethora of Kartvelian parties, with the possible exception of Irakli Shengelaia's Federalist Party, are virtually united in viewing the Abkhazians (and S. Ossetians) as traitors or dupes of Moscow -- even otherwise sane individuals find self-restraint difficult when the issue of Abkhazia is raised. The viciousness of the attacks on both Abkhazians and Ossetians across the whole Georgian-language media has to be read/heard to be believed -- indeed, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that this is anything other than a cynical attempt to create internal enemies so as to rouse support for the nationalists' cause; in other words, this is the same sort of perversion of patriotism practised for decades by the very Bolsheviks the nationalists would claim to despise. Especially pernicious is the vigour with which the discredited ideas of Pavle Ingoroqva (dating from the bleak late 1940s) are being re-disseminated not merely by politicians like Zviad Gamsakhurdia and writers (such as Revaz Mishveladze) but even by scholars in the disciplines of history (e.g. Davit Muskhelishvili) and philology (e.g. the Svan linguist Aleksandre

Oniani and the Georgian Givi Nebieridze). The sorry argument is that even the 300 years of residence on Georgian [sic!] territory that such commentators allow the Abkhazians give them no entitlement to rights -- for the Ossetians even the accepted minimum of 600 years is not enough! The paper I gave at the Vth Caucasian Colloquium addressed this particular question, since no serious scholar in the West doubts that the Abkhazians have occupied their present territory for at the very least 2,000 years, though this IN NO WAY implies, nor have the Abkhazians claimed that it does, that ONLY the Abkhazians have rights in Abkhazia. However, the implication behind this imputation of late arrival, an insult in itself, is not lost on the Abkhazians when repatriation (to where?!) is no longer a mere abstract concept, as noted above. All of this is accompanied by demands for the abolition of autonomous status for both Abkhazia and S. Ossetia (now achieved in the case of this latter), and meanwhile local Kartvelians are encouraged to avoid associating with Abkhazians and Ossetians in any club, society or organisation in which both communities previously participated (e.g. the Writers' Union or, most notoriously of all, since it led to the bloodshed in Abkhazia in July 1989, the splitting off of the Georgian sector from the Abkhazian University) in furtherance of what is a clear policy of racial segregation.

Fearful that the process of georgianisation begun by the Mensheviks (1918-21) and compounded by Beria and others in the middle years of the century, which period has been lauded by Gamsakhurdia for demonstrating the correct way to deal with the Abkhazians, could now be completed under resurgent chauvinism, S. Ossetia decided to seek union with N. Ossetia, and Abkhazia dared to declare itself independent from Georgia on 25th August 1990 -- this declaration was immediately rescinded by the authorities in Tbilisi, though there are indications that the recognition of its republican status by the Kremlin is perhaps imminent (as of June 1991). Indeed, the election to power on the 28th October/11th November of the coalition known as the Round Table under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the subsequent election of Gamsakhurdia as state-president are in the view of many observers, including this one, likely to prove utterly disastrous to the well-being of Georgia. To those who only know this person as the head of the Georgian Helsinki Group and are thus likely to think of him as manifestly a "decent chap" it will surely come as

a nasty surprise to discover what he actually stands for vis-à-vis Georgia's ethnic minorities. In his interview with the Dutch journalist, Laura Starink, published in *Zaterdag Bijvoegels* in January 1990 and subtitled with the quote "Our way is the way of civil war", he baldly admitted that it was his intention to instill in the South Ossetians the same fear of the Kartvelians that had been instilled in the Abkhazians in 1989! Do the consequences for the 30% non-Kartvelian population really have to be spelled out?! I think not.

If the message of this paper is depressing, that is because I judge the developments in Georgia from around the middle of 1988 to be exactly that. There seems to be a simplistic *credo* that, if only independence can be achieved, some form of heaven on earth will spring into being on Georgia's hallowed soil, wherein the various nationalities will live in harmonic bliss. This is surely belied by the hatred for, and suspicion of, the ethnic minorities that virtually all of the nationalist leaders², joined by a whole gamut of members of the Writers' Union and, I am alarmed to say, certain academics, have been calculatedly stirring up during this period. Authors sense no internal contradictions when they write of 'the Georgian phenomenon', of humanitarianism residing in the blood and even genes of the Georgian race, of the tolerance Georgians have always shewn towards other peoples taking up refuge and residence on Georgian soil, whilst simultaneously attacking with glorious unrestraint be it Abkhazians, Ossetians, Avars (Leks, as they indiscriminatingly refer to the various tribes of Daghestan) or Azerbaydzhanis residing there -- not to mention the Meskhians, whose desire to return home after 47 years of Central Asian exile has been constantly thwarted; one feels it is just a matter of time before some conflict with Georgia's sizeable Armenian population bubbles up. In their Open Letter addressed by writer L. Khaindrava and film-director E. Shengelaia to Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, occasioned by the latter's unflattering reference to Georgia in his advice on *How to organise Russia* (**Literary Georgia** 2nd Nov 1990, p.6) we are told the latest excuse for denying the Meskhians the right to return home. Since they are Turks [a matter that is surely in dispute -- B.G.H.], and the area in which they wish to reside is inhabited by Armenians, and since we know the history of Armeno-Turkish relations, the Kartvelians cannot allow their Armenian residents to face the danger

that would result from the Meskhians' return! The suggestion that the authorities in Georgia have taken the stand they have out of altruism for the well-being of their Armenian community will bring a wry smile to the face of those who know only too well the usual attitude of the Kartvelians towards the Armenians!

In saying all this and in speaking out, as I did in the summer of 1989, in defence of the Abkhazian position, I have in no way been motivated by anti-Georgian sentiment (quite the reverse!), or by receipt of '30 pieces of silver', or by a desire to hinder progress towards Georgian independence. I happen to hold no truck with the view that blames the whole series of the USSR's ethnic disputes on the conspiratorial role of Moscow and regard with suspicion the view, that by allowing the Georgians (Kartvelians?) to play the roles of prosecutor, judge and jury in their own court, all these conflicts will achieve a fair resolution. There is virtual proof of this in the interview the Procurator of Georgia, Vakhtang Razmadze, gave to **Literary Georgia** on 2nd November 1990 (pp.3-4), if indeed further proof were needed after this individual's statements on Georgian TV about a week after the killings in Sukhum in 1989. In general the article can best be interpreted as an attempt on the part of a functionary appointed under the old communist regime to secure his post now that former dissident Gamsakhurdia is in power. In his introductory remarks the interviewer states: "We know to what extent you personally fought against the Soviet Procurator removing from your jurisdiction the Abkhazian affair. We know too how the all-union organs tried to make you indict the leaders of the national movement following the 9th April, to which your reply was that you would discuss such outstanding matters only after they first indicted Rodionov and the other guilty ones [sc. for the deaths of 9th April 1989 in Tbilisi -- B.G.H.]. Not everyone knows this." In fact, it was quite widely reported at the time. What does it shew? It crucially shews that, although Razmadze evidently accepted there was a case for the nationalist leaders such as Gamsakhurdia, the late Merab Kostava and others to answer, he would not act on this unless action was taken against the military commander in Tbilisi on the night of 9th April. In other words, justice for Razmadze, the Procurator of Georgia, is nothing but a mere bargaining-chip!

For what it is worth, my view remains what it was from the start -- there has to be a full, frank and sincere acknowledgement of the

mistakes of the past, which, as I said in 1989, will involve the recognition that earlier attempts by Beria and others to georgianise Abkhazia and S. Ossetia were done 'in the name of the Georgians'. This does not mean that all Georgians are thereby guilty of the relevant deeds, which is what I have been accused of asserting³; it is merely a regrettable fact of life. Accepting it could clear the air and render possible a meaningful dialogue on the basis of mutual recognition of, and respect for, each other's rights, which is surely the essential pre-requisite for the peaceful co-existence we all desire for Georgia (indeed for Transcaucasia as a whole). Can this new start be made? I think one could have had precious little confidence in the now defeated communist leadership of Georgia -- one can have none at all in the present nationalist government. Let us only hope that there are individuals in the background who may well at this moment be being denied access to the media to make their voices heard, but who, recognising the wrong-headedness of the chauvinistic cause, will at some stage be both willing and able to correct it, thereby proving to all who look upon Georgia with more than the all-too-familiar superficial gaze that modern Georgia is truly worthy of its distinguished cultural inheritance. The fear must be, however, that before this corrective can be introduced, irreparable damage will have been done -- it may already be too late. Who knows what fate has in store for Georgia? One way or another, sooner or later, it is likely to gain some form of independence. I do not share the optimism of commentators like ITN's former Moscow correspondent, David Smith, who proclaim that Georgia probably possesses the wherewithal to survive on its own -- quite the contrary. Thus, when the begging bowl is proffered, there is no reason why the West's response should not be simply to ignore it, making it plain that it will attract funds only when the hand holding it behaves with dignity towards all the peoples on whose behalf it purports to be collecting. To those who argue that the surest way to defeat the evil of nationalistic repression of minorities is to help create that general prosperity in which tolerance of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences is more likely to exist, I would reply thus: while in general agreeing with the proposition, I feel that the situation has been brought to such a critical pitch by the words and actions of the Kartvelian nationalist leaders that any unconditional injection of funds would be taken by

them as a signal that the donors are in no way concerned with the internal ethnic troubles of Georgia. Given, as they would see it, such a green light, they might well adopt such measures as would ensure that there were no ethnic minorities left to benefit from any long-term improvement in the economy, if indeed such improvement were ever to materialise in this notoriously corrupt society. There is no Western self-interest that I can see on the altar of which the rights of Georgia's minorities need to be sacrificed. If the Kartvelians themselves do not realise and rectify the error of their ways, they must be persuaded to by what may be the only leverage left open to us. I cannot believe that Gamsakhurdia would be any more amenable to verbal persuasion on these issues than have been many (?all) of my own close acquaintances; indeed he has publicly labelled me one of the KGB's foreign agents, a ploy described by Roman Miminoshvili in response to an attack on him by one of Gamsakhurdia's blindest adherents, Guram Petriashvili, as an automatic response to anyone who openly disagrees with Gamsakhurdia's policies! What is required is a slap on the wrist, and the economic wrist is the one that counts. And at the very least, those who wish to proceed with forging relations with Georgia (academic, business or civic twinning) have to be constantly reminded that the concept 'Georgia' is by no means co-terminous with that of 'the Georgians' and that the non-Georgians too must be allowed to benefit from whatever advantages such links can bring.

To a 'born again' Georgia I say: "naqopisa matisagan icnnet igini" 'By their fruits shall ye know them'. If you seek to reap what your sons Stalin and Beria sowed, then you must be prepared to take the consequences...

Appendix

We have looked at the state of Caucasian languages in the N. Caucasus and Georgia. Lest I be accused of partial sightedness, let me add some comments on the situation in Azerbaydzhan and those Near Eastern countries in which speakers of Caucasian languages are to be found.

A number of the unwritten NEC languages (e.g. Budukh, Khinalugh, Kryts, two of the three Udi villages) are located within the borders of Azerbaydzhan, where some Lezgians also reside. What I have

suggested with reference to the situation in the N. Caucasus applies with equal force here. However, we have to note that part of the Georgian-speaking area falls also within the borders of Azerbaydzhani -- this is the region known in Georgian as Saingilo, which was awarded to Azerbaydzhani in 1921 (at the same time as Nagorno Karabakh!). Since 1988 a number of articles have appeared in the Georgian press complaining about the way in which the Georgians of this region have suffered linguistic and cultural repression. One particular criticism has concerned the way Azerbaydzhani academics have attempted to distort the local toponyms in order to "prove" that Georgians have no legitimate territorial claims there. If one bears in mind that an exact parallel exists to this in the way that Georgian Ingoroqva set out, come what may, in the late 40s to etymologise the toponyms in Abkhazia exclusively in terms of Kartvelian roots, with the result that many (most?) Kartvelians today seem convinced that all toponyms in Abkhazia are of Georgian (Kartvelian) origin (e.g. historian Lovard Tukhashvili's assertion of this "fact" on Georgian TV in July 1989), then one might be tempted to say that the Georgians' complaint against the actions of some Azerbaydzhani (pseudo-)scholars is a good example of the pot calling the kettle black! However, one's sympathies here must lie with the Georgians, and thus Azerbaydzhani authorities also must be appropriately censured unless corrective measures are taken.

Caucasian speakers, especially from the northern families, are found in sizeable numbers all over the Near East (e.g. Jordan, Syria, Israel, and predominantly Turkey). Today it is only in Israel that Circassian is taught, though up until 1956 it was evidently the medium of instruction in some schools in Syria too. Of the attitude towards ethnic minorities in Turkey Riexs Smeets has written: "In the history of Kemalistic Turkey the unofficial policy has wavered between repressive tolerance, indifference and state-terrorism. As to the official policy, I quote Lewis (1965:181): 'All one can say is that the Turkish Government's policy is one of complete liberality; officially there is no minorities problem because officially there are no minorities.'...

"The high degree of dispersion of, for instance, Circassians over Turkey and the arrival of technology and literacy even in the Turkish village contribute to the extinction of the W[est] C[aucasian] languages. It would require a centrally organised

language policy to save them. Ignorance and unwillingness will see to it that such a policy will never be adopted. And if this ignorance and unwillingness is to disappear, which is hardly likely in a country where even scholars let patriotism prevail over scholarship, then it will be too late, if it is not already" (1984:57-59). One cannot fail to note here a distinct echo of the approach to ethnic minorities we have described above in Georgia -- indeed, in his paper at the Vth Caucasian Colloquium Wolfgang Feurstein catalogued in detail this very parallelism⁴. Thus, if the Georgians' behaviour is beyond the pale, that of the Turks must be also. With Turkey the West already has a series of economic, political and military ties such that those of us who are worried about these languages or concerned about cultural repression should not hold back from discussing these problems either at public fora or with appropriate Turkish officials and individuals in private in order to do what we can to persuade our established friends and allies to adopt an altruistic stance so that they can play their part in helping these fascinating languages to continue their existence.

Clearly the task of conservation, be it inside or outside the Caucasus, will not be an easy one.

Footnotes

1. Instead of searching for the reason why the Abkhazians and S. Ossetians did not spontaneously embrace the cause of Georgian independence, the propaganda-machine tries to argue for external consumption that these peoples, especially the Abkhazians, are in fact pampered and privileged. One is tempted to the conclusion that the Abkhazians and South Ossetians must be the first people in history to seek separation from masters whose beneficence is beyond compare! The question is posed, for example, as to why, when S. Ossetians have language-schools with tuition in Ossetic to grade 5, they seek union with N. Ossetia, where (so it is claimed) there is only Russian schooling. The Abkhazians too have Abkhaz teaching to grade 5 in local-language schools, whereas, as we have seen, since 1959 the situation has been more restricted in the N. Caucasus. I strongly suspect that the avoidance of cut-backs in local-language tuition in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia will have been conditioned by the fact that at the time these schools had only been open again for 5/6

years, whilst the N. Caucasian local-language schools had suffered no parallel closure from 1944 to 1953. To restrict or shut them again so soon would, then, have been too risky. If this is indeed the explanation, their survival to 1990 will have owed more to historical accident than the positive fostering of two minority-languages by Tbilisi. Rejection of a proposal to introduce 10 years of schooling in Abkhaz results, as I understand it, from suspicions that this suggestion cannot be taken seriously when no appropriate courses or text-books have been designed, so that to transfer suddenly from 5 to 10 years, with consequent reduction in both teaching and competence in Russian, would have the undesirable effect of holding the children back from a still essential knowledge of Russian without any compensatory advantages, since the children would still be unable to play any greater role in Georgian society. Increase in, and consolidation of, local-language teaching for all of the relevant languages in our survey will thus have to achieve a careful balance between the needs of the local language and whatever major language (Russian, Georgian, Azeri) is important in the life of the relevant minority.

2. Recent reports from Georgia in parts of the British media have alluded to the bitter internecine conflict between Gamsakhurdia and his Kartvelian opponents. Irena Sarishvili of the National Democratic Party (NDP), which forms part of the rival-parliament known as the National Congress, has spoken of Gamsakhurdia alone managing to frighten the Ossetians, for example (BBC World Service). And in a document that has just reached the West her husband, Giorgi Chanturia, president of the NDP, speaks of "criminal bandits under the guidance of Gamsakhurdia terrorising the population of Georgia". The implication is perhaps that the real hope for a democratic and peaceful Georgia lies with leaders like Chanturia. It is, thus, crucial to stress that in 1989 Chanturia was no less restrained than Gamsakhurdia in his utterances about Abkhazia, as, for example, in his party's declaration to the government of Georgia, dated 18 July 1989, in which one of the demands was for the imposition of direct-rule from Tbilisi upon the "so-called" Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia!

3. Mention of the Yezhovshchina or Beriashchina elicits the automatic response from Georgians that they suffered more than anyone else at the time from anti-Georgian leaders who paradoxically were

themselves Kartvelians (Stalin, Beria). One can hardly deny the suffering, but on the question of anti-Georgianism it would be interesting to learn the Kartvelian response to the following observations by Robert Conquest (**The Nation Killers**, 1970 edition): "...the main Karachai and Balkar regions to the north and east of Mt.Elbrus respectively were both annexed to Georgia, which also obtained a large area of the south part of the former Chechen-Ingush Republic. An important gain was also made by the N. Ossetian Autonomous Republic.

"This provides some insight into the rating of the nations by the Soviet government. *Georgia, Stalin's (and Beria's) home republic, was inordinately favoured* [stress added -- B.G.H.]. Moreover its spread right across the dividing line of the main chain of the Caucasus was unexpected. In fact the division of the Ossetian nation into two separate administrative areas -- the N. Ossetian ASSR and the S. Ossetian Autonomous Province (the latter forming part of Georgia) had been justified on the grounds of the physical division produced by the mountains" (p.68).

"Those [regions] which had earlier gone to Georgia had been retroceded to the RSFSR by a decree of 14 March 1955. This transfer...seems to confirm our earlier consideration of the administrative difficulties of the previous arrangement, which had no compensating advantages except in *pleasing the Georgians, no longer an important consideration after the deaths of Stalin and Beria* [stress added -- B.G.H.]" (p.148).

4. This paper is due to be published in a volume provisionally entitled **Caucasian Perspectives** (edited by B.G. Hewitt), which will also include a selection of other papers read at the Vth Colloquium.

References

Hewitt, B.G. 1985. Georgian: a noble past, a secure future. *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages*, I.T. Kreindler (ed.), 163-179. Mouton de Gruyter: New York.

Hewitt, B.G. 1989. Aspects of language planning in Georgia (Georgian and Abkhaz). *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, Michael Kirkwood (ed.), 123-144. Macmillan: London.

Itonishvili, V. 1990. *kartveli xalxis etnost'rukt'ura mrude sark'eshi* [The Ethno-structure of the Georgian People in a Distorting Mirror]. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.

Lewis, G. 1965. *Turkey*. New York: Praeger.

Smeets, R. 1984. *Studies in West Circassian Phonology and Morphology*. Leiden: Hakuchi Press.

B.G. Hewitt

SOAS

London University

England

(Prepared for SSEES' 75th Anniversary Conference December 1990)