

## Book review

Metin Sönmez & George Hewitt (eds), *Abkhazia 1992-2022: Reflections on Abkhazia Series*, Koyusiyah Publishing, 2022, 465 p.

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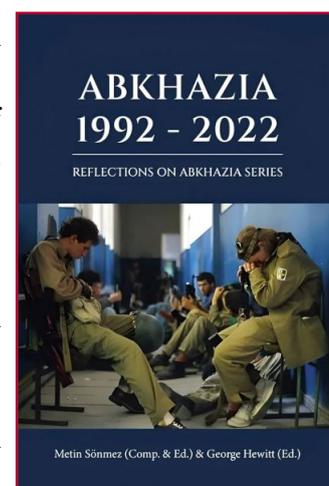
One of the main interests in this book – a compilation of contributions on a range of Abkhazia-related topics – resides in its attempts to bring together differently situated scholars, journalists, and activists to engage in knowledge production about today's Abkhazia. At first sight, this may seem like yet another overview of a specific place, but focusing on Abkhazia is far from straightforward. Abkhazia unilaterally separated from Georgia after the ceasefire of 1994 signed in Moscow, which ended the 1992-1993 war between Abkhazia and Georgia. Historical accounts of this war diverge: Abkhazian scholars argue that most fighters were from Abkhazia, rendering Abkhazia's victory legitimate, while Georgian scholars emphasise the decisive role of Northern Caucasian fighters, without whom, they argue, Georgia would have retained control over Abkhazia (Kvarchelia 1998; Nodia 1997).

This divergence continues today. The 2008 Russia-Georgia war, mostly fought over South Ossetia, had direct ramifications in Abkhazia and led to Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia's (and South Ossetia's) independence. Georgia has since adopted a law on "occupied territories" defining these regions as occupied as a result of Russian military aggression (see Article 1: Purpose of the Law). The conception of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) as "occupied by Russia" remains vivid in Georgia, is debated among scholars, and has been reactivated by Russia's all-out war on Ukraine since February 2022 (Le Pavic 2024).

Against this backdrop, a book that brings together knowledge producers from different conflicting sides is more than necessary, and still too rare. (Academic) collaborations between Georgians and Abkhaz are almost non-existent, and when they do occur, they often remain undercover to protect (Abkhaz) participants, thereby preventing publication of results. Notable exceptions include the edited volume *Federal practice: Exploring alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* by Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba (Coppieters et al. 2000), as well as publications from Conciliation Resources and International Alert, such as *Mediation and dialogue in the South Caucasus: A reflection on 15 years of conflict transformation initiatives* (Kobakhia et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup>

The efforts of the 39 contributors and the main editor, Metin Sönmez, supported by the linguist George Hewitt – whose role as acting as a consul of Abkhazia in the United Kingdom remains controversial – must therefore be acknowledged. While space is too limited here to present all contributors in detail, the volume includes: Aivar Jürgenson, Alexander Iskandaryan, Aslanbek Mirzoev, Beslan Kobakhia, Cem Kumuk, Charlotte Hille, Christopher Langton, Clayton Payne, Dieter Boden, Dodge Billingsley, Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Edward Mihalkanin, Elçin Başol, Fehim Taştekin, Giulia Prelz Oltramonti, Inal Khashig, Jade Cemre Erciyes, Karlos Zurutuza, Ketevan Murusidze, Kieran Pender, Marina Elbakidze, Maxim Gvindzhia, Natella Akaba, Paata Zakareishvili, Patrick Armstrong, Paula Garb, Ramesh Ganohariti, Rick Fawn, Stanislav Lakoba, Stephen Shenfield, Thomas de Waal, Timothy K. Blauvelt, Ucha Nanuashvili, Uwe Klussmann, Ümit Dinçer, Yasemin Oral, Vadim Mukhanov, Vitaly Sharia, Vladislav Bugera, Zaira Khiba.

1 I thank Malkhaz Toria for bringing this to my attention.



The Latin sentence “*Audi alteram partem*” (“listen to the other side” or “let the other side be heard as well”) sets the tone of the preface by Metin Sönmez, an independent researcher and founder of websites dedicated to Abkhazia and Circassia. This introductory remark serves as a corrective to dominant narratives framing Abkhazia as “part of Georgia, but occupied by Russia.” The preface situates this book as a continuation of *Reflections on Abkhazia: [14 August] 1992-2012*, aiming to bring together different perspectives on what is framed as the “Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.” Contributors were free to select their own topics, and the resulting 39 texts – published alphabetically – form a patchwork of historical vignettes, (post-)conflict analyses, and more personal stories and reflections.

The preface, focused on the last three decades (1992-2022), opens with a historical overview reaching back to 780-978, “when the Kingdom of Abkhazia flourished and the Abkhazian Dynasty extended its sway over much of what is now Western Georgia.” Such accounts are, unsurprisingly, highly contested in contexts where historical writing is tightly linked to rival nation-building projects (Coppieters 2002). Importantly, the preface – like many contributions – acknowledges that by the end of the war on 30 September 1993, “thousands died on both sides”: Abkhazians lost 4% of their population, about 200 000 Georgians became refugees, and many volunteers from the North Caucasus and diaspora also died. This heavy toll is echoed in Natella Akaba’s contribution “Freedom paid for with blood,” which emphasizes how quickly neighbours “who had lived side by side for decades, helped each other, sat at common wedding or memorial tables, and shared their most intimate stories” suddenly and brutally turned against one another along ethnic lines (p. 278).

There is no inevitability in ethnicised divisions; rather, individuals are instrumentalised to serve the interests of competing parties in power struggles. Several contributions highlight pre-conflict dynamics. Cem Kumuk notes that Abkhazia and Georgia were on the verge of independence between 1917 and 1921, a fluid period following the Russian Revolution when several political assemblages emerged – such as the Republic of the Union of the North Caucasian Mountaineers – before being terminated by the Red Army invasion of Georgia between 12 February and 17 March 1921. Between 1918 and 1921, Vadim Mukhanov observes that the 1917 Russian Revolution had brought to Georgia and Abkhazia “a sense of hope for the establishment of life in the region on a new basis” (p. 374), but this hope was soon overtaken by power rivalries among different groups, with the Bolsheviks ultimately prevailing. A telling episode is the correspondence between Georgia-born Menshevik Artem Pantsulaia and Nestor Lakoba, a prominent Abkhaz Bolshevik later poisoned by Lavrentiy Beria in 1936. Timothy K. Blauvelt analyses one of Pantsulaia’s letters, which mentions the mass deportations of Abkhaz in the 1860s’ and 1870s’ by Russian imperial authorities – an often-overlooked episode that profoundly reshaped Abkhazia through demographic change (p. 344, see also De Waal 2011).

Other contributions shed light on less-known aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Aslanbek Mirozev examines the role of Circassians under Adam Khuade and Chechens under Shamil Basaev, detailing the mobilisation and fighting of North Caucasian “armed volunteers” (p. 52). Aivar Jürgenson highlights the Estonian orientalist Linnart Mäll and his active role in the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, of which Georgia and Estonia became founding members in February 1991, with Abkhazia joining in August that year. While Estonia and Georgia withdrew upon joining the UN, Abkhazia remained a member until 2020 and continues to hold partial recognition.

The question of recognition itself has been a central theme. Georgia’s diplomacy has consistently focused on preventing other states from recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign. Ümit Dinçer and Yasemin Oral discuss the prospects for International Recognition of Abkhazia, concluding that state recognition is shaped less by a consistent application of international law than by political ambivalence. According to the constitutive approach, “an entity becomes a state when it is recognised as such” (Ryngaert and Sobrie 2011, 469). For Beslan Kobakhia, Abkhazia’s recognition by only five states to date represents a “failure” to internationalise Abkhaz aspirations. Clayton Payne shows that this limited recognition has also excluded Abkhazia from global environmental governance mechanisms, restricting resources for environmental protection and exacerbating long-term ecological challenges (p. 144).

Most contributions, however, focus on post-conflict dynamics. Looking at three decades of negotiations within the Geneva International Discussions (GID), Charlotte Hille describes them as an “*impasse*,” even before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine temporarily suspended talks. Today, the GID remains one of the few points of contact between the European Union (UE) and Russian officials. Despite some agreements, the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism between Georgia and Abkhazia remains suspended, while a parallel mechanism with South Ossetia is still functioning. Dieter Boden, former Special Representative of the United-Nations (UN) Secretary-General in Georgia (1999-2002), provides an insider’s account of UN efforts to negotiate a peace deal in 2001-2002. In this capacity, he drafted a document on the distribution of competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, endorsed by Russia’s representative to the UN at the time, Sergei Lavrov. Article 2 of the proposal stated: “Abkhazia is a sovereign entity, based on the rule of law, within the State of Georgia.” Negotiations stalled, however, as Eduard Shevardnadze (for Georgia) and Vladislav Ardzinba’s representative (for Abkhazia) each rejected the compromise – Georgia opposing the reference to Abkhazia as a “sovereign entity” and Abkhazia objecting to its inclusion “within the State of Georgia.”

Beyond questions of status, one of the most contentious issues in the GID remains the return of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) to Abkhazia. In “Georgian-Abkhazian direct dialogue: necessity or danger?” Marina Elbakidze raises the question of IDP return (p. 263), echoed in the concluding section “Politics and issues in Abkhazia’s relations with Georgian,” though here more to highlight how successive Georgian governments – under Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili instrumentalised the issue. While this tendency has diminished under the ruling party Georgian Dream (in power since 2012), displaced Georgians cannot be expected to return safely to Abkhazia. Crossing into Abkhaz-controlled territory is possible for those with relatives who can secure the necessary documentation, but cases of denial of entry (*otkaz* [отказ] in Russian) still occur, producing intra-family separations. At the same time, crossing into Georgia for Abkhaz has become increasingly difficult amid tighter surveillance and rising societal pressures (Peinhopf 2022).

In conclusion, we concur with Donnacha Ó Beacháin that to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, “One must first acknowledge it” (p. 161). Yet in Georgia today, recognizing the conflictual relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia (and similarly with South Ossetia), or even mentioning its ethnicised dimensions, is increasingly denounced as “nothing but an attempt to brainwash students through imposing false views that totally correspond to Russian narratives to justify its unlawful actions,” as the Georgian ambassador to Ireland wrote in relation to Ó Beacháin’s teaching of the conflict (p. 162). Rightly, Ó Beacháin reminds us of the role of universities and academic writing, which is to “foster critical thinking not least by exposing students (and readers) to multiple viewpoints” (p. 196).

This does not diminish the importance of “The radioactive decay of Russian imperialism,” highlighted in Paata Zakareishvili’s contribution. Zakareishvili, Georgia’s State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality from 2012 to 2016, underlines Russia’s imperialist relay, impacting the South Caucasus region and Georgia in particular. Yet it is worth recalling that before recognising Abkhazia’s sovereignty in 2008, Russia aligned with Georgia’s 1996 embargo agreement, which suspended all commercial, financial, and transport links with Abkhazia. Russia did not officially withdraw from this embargo until spring 2008 (see Rick Fawn’s contribution, p. 312).

Together with Thomas de Waal, this review reflects on “the sad anniversary of 30 years of conflict” (p. 335) and emphasises the urgency of addressing unresolved trauma and painful memories transmitted across generations – legacies that sustain conflict rather than allow people to overcome it and imagine a different future. Guranda Bursulaia’s (2020) analysis of Georgian history textbooks is revealing. A joint analysis of textbooks in both Abkhazia and Georgia would be valuable to understand what narratives are shaping new generations and how they might be transcended. A history curriculum that acknowledges losses on all sides – rather than glorifying one and vilifying the other – could help shift perspectives. Thirty years after the 1994 Moscow ceasefire, a peace treaty between Abkhazia and Georgia remains elusive. Such a joint history book could contribute to achieving it – or, more likely, would be its outcome.

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