

Iulon Gagoshidze

Dr. Art History, Georgian National Museum

ABKHAZIANS AND OSSETIANS IN GEORGIA

HISTORY AND NOWADAYS

The actualization of the issue of Abkhazians and Ossetians towards Georgia is associated with the collapse process of the Soviet Union. Twenty years ago a few person could know that in some place in Caucasia, in one of the Republics of the Soviet union, called The Soviet Republic of Georgia, subsisted the territorial-administrative formations of „Abkhazia” and „The South Ossetia”, the first under the status of the Autonomous Republic and the second under the status of the Autonomous District. Today the situation is changed. Today, after the Russian-Georgian war the world learnt that specified regions are occupied by Russian troops, that this occupation is being continued by the violation of all international standards and rules, despite of the fact that the „independence” of Abkhazia and the South Ossetia, declared by Russia, was recognized by no one except Hamas, maybe by Nicaragua.

Along with the military occupation of Georgia, in order to justify its aggression against Georgia, Russia has launched the informational war. Russia is trying to convince the world as if the regions occupied by it never consisted in Georgia, just like Saakashvili treacherously attacked Tskhinvali and if not the Russian tanks, peacefully Ossetians living there could not avoid the genocide from Georgian side. The Western media as well, unfortunately, quite frequently, in accordance with claim unchangeably repeats the Russian version of the Russian-Georgian war reason. It is hard to say how it can be explained, by the authors’ ignorance, indifference, or in the effect that Russia is generously financing its informational war.

But I am not going to unmask all those lies that are abundantly presented in the fabricated publications through the request of Russian officials. I’ll simply try to follow Abkhazians’ and Ossetians’ settlement and living history on the territory of Georgia along with you and to speak about how they occurred to be induced in a bloody conflict.

Let’s start with Ossetians. In the North Caucasia Ossetians are the only Iranian speaking nation, but anthropologically, by culture and according to the ethno-psychological signs, they are typical Caucasians. This ethnic „bifacial” nature is caused therewith that in their ethnogeny Iranian speaking nomads of the Eurasia steppes took part, as well as Caucasian autochthonic population. Ossetians’ direct Iranian speaking ancestors – Ass and Allans appeared in the steppes of the North Caucasia in 1st century A.D. and went into history as incomparable horsemen warriors, who were horrendous to all Near East in the 1st-4th centuries. From time to time their troops robbed Parthia, Armenia, Eastern provinces of Rome, even Egypt. But it is notable that they never robbed the kingdom of Kartli (Iberia). The point is that to get from the North Caucasia to the Near East was possible only through Dariali pass and Dariali pass was controlled by Georgians. So Allans, without making agreement with the authorities of Kartli kingdom could not arrange neither their robbery incursions, nor could manage the regular trading-economic contacts with the Anterior Asia, by which both sides were equally interested.

Ties between Georgia and Allans has not ceased hereafter, when in the 9th-10th centuries, in the west part of the North Caucasia, on the steppes Allans established a vast kingdom, which Byzantines mentioned as Allania and Georgians as Ovseti. Christianity in Ovseti-Allania was spread by the king of Abkhazs Giorgi II, who ruled in the West Georgia (in Abkhazia) in 922-957. That’s why almost all terms associated with Christianity in Ossetian language is borrowed from Georgian (dzuar – jvari, morkho-markhva, Tarangelos-Mtavarangelozhi, Mikalgabirta-Mikelgabrieli, Giorguba-Giorgoba, etc.). The most vivid reflection of the close relations between Allania-Ovseti and Georgia were ruling line weddings, especially in the 11th-12th centuries:

Georgian kings Giorgi I (1014-1027), Bagrat IV (1027-1072), Giorgi III (1156-1184) took in marriage Ovsetian princesses, Queen Tamar's (1184-1210) husband Davit Soslan was the heir of the throne of Ovsetian kingdom.

The state of Allania-Ovseti was destroyed first by Mongols in the 13th century and then, at the end of the 14th century smashed by Tamerlan. The main multitude of Allan-Ossetians was constrained to seek shelter in the mountainous gorges of the central Caucasus, while the plain of the ancient Allania at that time was occupied by reinforced Kabardinians.

Right in the mountainous part of the central Caucasus, as a result of confluence-mixing of Allan-Ossetians with the aboriginal Caucasian mountaineers, the present day Ossetian ethnos was formed in the 15th-17th centuries, which encloses two sub-ethnoses: Irs (Iron) and Digors. Digors substitute the west part of the Ossetians' resettlement territory, where in the 17th-18th centuries, Islam was spread under the influence of Kabardinian seigniors, while Irs, whose name today became entirely the self-term of Ossetians (Iron) and Ossetia (Iriston), are the sole nation in North Caucasus, who represent the confessors of Christianity.

In the 17th century Iron-Ossetians started peaceful migration in the alpine gorges of the northern part of the central Georgia. This action was sanctioned by the central authorities of Georgia, as well as by Georgian feudals, concerned by the increasing of serf-peasants. Around the end of the 18th century, in the springs of the rivers Tergi, Ksani, Liakhvi, Aragvi, Jejora and Kvirila, the number of Ossetian new settlers made 4000 households. Ossetians movement into Georgia through the paved way was continued in the 19th-20th centuries too, when Georgia was already conquered by Russians and Ossetian settlements in internal territories of Georgia, in Trialeti, Borjomi-Bakuriani and Kakheti emerged as well. In 1989 the population of Ossetians in Georgia reached 164000 and among ethnic minorities living in Georgia, Ossetians, after Azerbaijanians, Russians and Armenians took the fourth place. The process of Ossetians lodging in Georgia was not always peaceful: indigent mountainy Ossetians, every time, when they had an opportunity, used to rob, startle, throw out from the villages and even kill unarmed Georgian peasants without any esteem.

In 1774-1781 North Caucasian Ossetians, together with Kabardinians became the guardians of Russia. Ossetians liberated from the Kabardinian feudals' guardianship started to settle from the gorges of Caucasus in the lowlands of the river Tergi edges, from where Russians expelled Ingushians. Ossetians became reliable allies of Russian authorities in Caucasia and Ossetia – the foothold of Russian imperialistic ideas. The encouragement and usage of Ossetians for fighting first against Kabardinians and Ingushians and afterwards against Georgians, from the side of Russia was only *divide ed impera* policy fulfillment and nothing more, otherwise the fate of Ossetians and Ossetia, as well as the fate of Ingushians and other Caucasian ethnoses, among which some of them are even totally wiped out „by dint of” Russia did not disturb Russia.

In 1801 the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti turned out to be consisting in Russia and since then among Ossetians settled in Georgia and native Georgian population Russian administrators became the mediators, who, at every turn, in a conflict situations always supported Ossetians. At the very beginning of the 19th century Russians snap away from Tbilisi government the territory of historical Dvaleti which was at the upper loin of the river Ardon and which always constituted as the part of Georgia and today appears as a part of the Russian federation – North Ossetia. Yet in 20-ies of the 19th century, for marking Georgian territories inhabited with Ossetians, Russians established the term „South Ossetia”, where the insidious design of further dismember and disbandment of Georgia is enclosed. Here is implied the following: there exists Ossetia, divided into two parts – into the North and the South Ossetia, the unification of which is just the point of time. It's worthwhile that in recent Russian language publications a new term - „Trialeti Ossetia” emerged as well and hereby professedly was expressed the appetite of all three „Ossetias” unification, which should devastate Georgia. It's fitty to the point and we should say as well that Ossetians' compact settlements in Trialeti are relatively new formations. These settlements were framed in reliance of Trialeti mountain pastures (summer pastures), belongings to Shida Kartli Georgian villages, which, under 1866 reform were passed to Ossetians, living there under the

refugee (leaseholders) status fairly free of charge. Ossetians had to pay 3 rubles for *desiatina* (apr.12000sq.m), while the law forced Georgian peasants to buy one *desiatina* of his own land for 60 rubles.

According to this reform authorities of Russia hit two targets straightway: firstly, split Georgian traditional agriculture, separating from each other mountains and lowlands, in the second place, represented by Ossetians settled in the very middle Kartli, gained in once opinion reliable footing for prevention and liquidation of forthcoming rebellion of freedom-loving Georgians bearing state traditions.

On 26 May 1918 Georgia regained its independence. The Democratic Republic of Georgia was established within historical boundaries of Georgia, which was recognized by number of states of the world (in May 1920 recognized even by Russia) and *de-facto* recognized by the League of Nations too. Evidently Russia could not stand the collapse of the empire and instantly started to run „the Ossetian Trump”. In 1918, as well as in 2008, they landed military troops from the North Caucasia in Georgia and under the slogan of consolidation of the „South Ossetia” with the Soviet Russia accomplished the inspiration of Ossetians’ anti-Georgian rebellion. Georgian guards by the agency of the native Georgian and Ossetian population suppressed the Bolsheviks rebellion. The rebellion was replayed again in 1919 and 1920 and ended with the same result.

But in February 1921 Russia, in its own typical manner, unilaterally violated the agreement signed 8 months ahead and conquered the Democratic Republic of Georgia. The government of the Bolshevik Russia „punished” uncompromising Georgia and on the account of its historical territories „awarded” all those who helped in conquering Georgia: territory of historical Dvaleti in the spring of Ardon river and the city Sochi with its surroundings was assigned to the Russian Federation, Saingilo - to Azerbaijan, lower Kartli mountains – Lore-Bambaki, settled that time mostly by Azerbaijanians - to Armenia and historical Tao-Klarjeti, Karsi region and the part of Batumi region - to Turkey. The praise of Ossetians of Georgia was notably marked. Under the Revcom resolution of 1921, 31 October, in the northern part of the central Georgia „The Autonomous District of the South Ossetia” was established, with its centre in Tskhinvali, where only several Ossetian families lived at that time (It should be stressed that „the Autonomous Republic of the North Ossetia” was established after two years).

The toponymic (place-name) pair - „South” and „North” Ossetias were legitimated in such a way, - the long lasting mine, which was animated by the central government of Russia instantly, in 1990, when Georgia started to restore its independence. Before it was 70 years of the Soviet system, which was good only for the party *nomenclatura*, notwithstanding its ethnicity. Jews were banished from Tskhinvali, the number of Georgians was diminished and the ethnic cleansing started in the Autonomous District, though all these happened „in a peaceful manner” : nobody could hear a human being who could put forth voice. The artificiality and deformity of the territorial formation of the „South Ossetia” are reflecting from the next points: the central region – Liakhvi gorge, with Tskhinvali, totally was separated from the Akhagori district, Ksani and Lekhura gorges, where one can get from Tskhinvali only via Gori. Jejori and Kvirila gorges are separated as well from Tskhinvali, which properly are the parts of Racha and Imereti, respectively... But one should mention as well that in Liakhvi gorge, as in Ksani, Georgians and Ossetians used to live peacefully side by side and as far as they both are Orthodox Christians, the mixed weddings between them were quite frequent. Unlike „The North Ossetia” Ossetian schools were in „The South Ossetia”, scientific-research and pedagogical institutes worked, books, newspapers and magazines were published on the Ossetian language, one could hear Ossetian speech, while in the North Ossetia Ossetian was replaced by Russian.

Perestroika and the painful process of the Soviet Union collapse were ahead.

Abkhazians, differently from Ossetians, are the autochthon nation of Caucasia, which has no other homeland, but Georgia. That is why, according to the Georgian constitution the Abkhazian language, together with Georgian one, is declared as state language in Abkhazia. The

Abkhazians call themselves Apsuas and Abkhazia itself - Apsni. The Apsuan language together with its closely related Abaza language (Abazas live in North Caucasia) belong to Abkhazian-Adigean group of Iberian-Caucasian language family.

According to recent anthropological research, which is also based on data of the craniology, as well as dermatoglyphic and izoantigenic systems, it becomes clear, that Apsuas differently from Abazas, are showing special resemblance with Georgians and these signs amalgamate them with Georgians. This is a result of century-old co-existence of Georgians and Apsuas, which is also reflected on Afsuan-Abkhazian language, ethnography and generally, on culture, which Abkhazians and Georgians have same.

The scientists consider Abasks and Apsils to be the direct ancestors of Apsua-Abkhazians. Abasks and Apsils are mentioned in Greco-Roman written sources after the 2nd century A.D. living on Black Sea coast, together with Lazs, Sanigs, Zigs, Missimians and other tribes. According to data of the 2nd century ruler of Kappadokia Arrian, next to Lazs lived Apsils and Abasks, which also were ruled by the Roman authorized kings named Julian and Resmag, respectively.

Since the 4th century Abkhazia was considered as part of Lazika kingdom. In the 6th century, during the Greco-Persian war Apsilians and Misimians betrayed Lazika. In the 7th century Lazika and Abaskia separately from each other obey the Byzantine emperor. In the 8th century the Arabs had conquered Georgia. Close to Anakopia principal of Abkhazia Leon together with Kartli and Egrisi kings was fighting against the Arabs with 2000 warriors. After the departure of Arabs from west Georgia, in 80s of the same century the Abkhazian Principal Leon II occupied the whole territory of west Georgia, declared Kutaisi as capital city of his kingdom and received the title of king. Leon has divided his kingdom into 8 principalities. Two among those were situated on the present territory of Abkhazia, Tskhumi (old Georgian name of Sokhumi) principality in the South-East and towards the North-West from it particularly Abkhazian principality, to which also Jiketi (Sochi-Tuapse region) was subordinated. Anakopia remained in Tskhumi principality.

The Abkhazian kings if not ethnically, at least culturally and politically were as Georgians as Tao-Klarjeti and Kakhet-Hereti kings and involved into the inter-fighting, ultimately aiming at unification of Georgia. Every inscription, without an exception, ordered by Abkhazian kings or made on their behalf is Georgian. Furthermore, the oldest Georgian inscriptions in west Georgia are survived in native land of Apsua-Abkhazia, particularly in Gudauta. All these indicates, what a deep was a degree of integration of Apsua-Abkhazians with Georgians. The fact, that already in early medieval period Abkhazians' language of communication, as well as cultural, literary, pray language was Georgian, is proved by simple, smooth unification of Abkhazian church with Kartli Patriarchy in the 10th century, after being separated from Constantinople subordination.

The Abkhazian kings seized an initiative of unification of Georgia. In 980 the son of Georgian king Bagrat Bagrationi, the heir of Abkhazian kings on mother's side, was crowned as King of Abkhazians in Kutaisi. After the death of his father Gurgen Bagrat practically become the king of unified Georgia and Bagrat III was titled as king of Abkhazians and Kartvelians. Afterwards following the annexation of different Georgian or none-Georgian kingdoms or principalities the titles of Georgian Kings were respectively increased by new names (King of Abkhazians, Kartvelians, Rans, Kakhetians, Armenians, and Movakanians, Shahansha and Shirvansha), but until the king Tamar (1184-1210), including, Georgian kings was shortly were called as kings of Abkhazia and hence, Georgia was known for foreigners as Abkhazia. Great Persian poet of the 12th century Khaqani charmed by the beauty of one of the female resident of Tbilisi wrote in his verse: „The beauty of Abkhazian lady has made me to learn Georgian language“.

Even in late medieval period, when Georgia was disintegrated, the unity of Abkhazians and Georgians has been preserved. In spite of the battles and rivalry, all political unities, built on the ruins of Georgia, among them Abkhazia too, considered itself as part of Georgia, but in the

second half of the 19th century, Abkhazia undergone catastrophic stroke, which reminds still nowadays.

After Shamil's imprisonment in 1859, numerous Russian army began conquering process of west Caucasia. Russian authorities decided to throw up local population from Black sea coastline. After anti-Russian rebellion of Abkhazians in 1866, Russians evicted population from Tsebelda, Dali and Bichvinta and totally 19 342 person were exiled to Turkey, among them were also Georgians. The second stage of Abkhazians forced eviction in Turkey was done in 1877. 31 964 Abkhazians were deported. Abkhazia's coastline was almost devastated. Empty land was landed by Russians, Germans and Greeks.

Abkhazian nation was saved from total destruction by Georgian priests, as they were baptizing muslim Abkhazians massively, but forced migration process put irreparable stamp at Abkhazia and Abkhazians. It touched mostly to Abkhazia's plain population, which was more civilized and integrated with Georgians relatively to highlanders. Thus, because of this eviction, thread of historical development was torn in Abkhazia. Past memories extirpation process among Abkhazians began by Tsarist Russia, successfully was completed by Soviet Russia, which exterminated Abkhazian nobles which preserved historical memory.

Abkhazia-Georgia's future relationship issues were raised on 19-23 November 1917, at first national assembly, where Samurzakano's representatives also were presented. They were against Abkhazia's unification into Caucasian highlanders union. There was expressed an opinion, that Abkhazia together with Samurzakano should be part of Georgia and granted national-cultural autonomy. Abkhazians delegation also attended meeting in Tbilisi on 9th February, 1918.

Very soon, after Sokhumi Bolshevik criminal putsch on 18th February 1918, in Sokhumi was held local district peasants second assembly, which received historical decision, that Abkhazia's future should be connected with democratic Georgia. Bolsheviks intruded in Sokhumi from Russian side in April, 1918 and Georgian army defeated them with the help of Abkhazians.

Georgia's independence was declared on 26th May, 1918. Abkhazia became part of democratic Georgian republic and was granted autonomous status by the treaty of 11th June, 1918. Post of minister for Abkhazian affairs was established at the government of Georgia.

Russia always considered and considers Abkhazia as its property gained in the battle and that's why can not concede this territory till now for others even for Abkhazians. That's why Bolsheviks were fighting against democratic Georgia for Abkhazia. Total occupation of Georgia and Abkhazia by Bolshevik Russia was over on March, 1921. Abkhazia was declared as socialist republic, but then entered into composition of Georgian state with autonomous republic status. Abkhazia was the only territorial unit in former Soviet union, where nation which gave the name to this unit, composed there ethnical minority (Abkhazians constituted there 17,2% of Abkhazia's population, Georgians – 47,7%).

Destruction of Soviet Union was began by Georgia. At meetings in April, 1989, first time were declared political statements and demonstrators were demanding Georgia's independence. Kremlin took steps and with the help of military forces organized cruel massacre. The result was 21 killed and hundreds of poisoned with unknown gas.

After the massacre begun unprecedented rise of national-liberation movement in Georgia and on 30 October 1990, first time in the history of Soviet Union, was held multi-party elections of Supreme council, where Communist party was totally defeated.

National powers won and head of council was elected former dissident and political prisoner Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Kremlin took measures itself: activated separatist organizations in Abkhazia (Aidgilara) and in South Osetia (Adamon Nikhas). There was a Georgians bloodshed in Abkhazia as well but conflict was stewed for a while. South Osetia proclaimed itself as a republic and in reply to it Supreme Council of Georgia abolished South Osetian Autonomous District.

In March 31, 1991 more than 90% of Georgian citizens, Osetians and Abkhazians among them, voted unanimously to separation from the Soviet Union, in April 9 the Supreme Council proclaimed restoration of independence of Georgia. Threaten from president Gorbachov followed immediately: he mentioned that Georgia can get out from the Soviet Union but without Abkhazia and South Osetia. Kremlin try to stir the conflict up in Abkhazia that time, as to conflict in South Osetia actually it was completed in November, 1991: there were ten gunmen stayed in Tskhinvali and in December 6 I took the part in the negotiations in North Osetia, were Osetian side asked us for softly ending of the conflict and restoration of status quo.

But there was late already. in December 19 Georgia refused entrance in the CIS and in 22 there started planned in advance armed conflict by “opposition”, who openly were supported by Russian army. Putsch ended with coup d'état and military junta set by Russian intelligence services led the country, who soon “invited” real organizer of the military coup Eduard Shevardnadze, who renewed conflict in Tskhinvali and inforced fratricidal war in Abkhazia, the war, which was doomed to failure in advance and ended with ethnic cleansing - approximately half million of Georgian citizens, mainly ethnic Georgians were persecuted in their home country by Russian military occupation in the conflict regions, despite occupants were cold peacekeepers. That was the revenge of the Soviet Union.

Separated, impoverished and sink in corruption Georgia after the Revolution of Roses in 2003 during four years became one of the low corrupted and economically most developed country, where the best conditions for the investments. Reforms carried out in military and police service, in education, health and insurance branches made life fresher. Problem in power engineering is solved once and for all, building and especially road one is especially in its pick.

Separatism in Adjara region was stopped. There was restored order in Kodori Gorge. There started peace attack to Abkhazian and Osetian separatism: in Liakhvi Gorge millions were invested, built sportive complexes, cinemas, park amusements, trade centers, hospitals, water-lines, gas-pipelines, roads etc. Georgians and Osetians could use them altogether. The same work was carried out in Kodori, Abkhazia.

Georgia chose the integration with West world and step-by-step started to become a free democratic country.

Any success of Georgia made negative reaction of Russia. Russia established visa regime, blocked Georgia economically and power, stopped air contact, started persecution of Georgian residents in Russia, severed occupation regime in conflict regions. Russia started to prepare for the intervention.

Georgian president and government warned the West about war threatens.

Everything was evident after august war in 2008. Russia openly appeared before the world as an aggressor, which is risky not only for Georgia.

After war appearance of Russian authorities showed to the world its imperialistic intentions: to restore the Soviet Union. For the reanimation of the USSR there is legislation base prepared. In December 17 2001 Putin pushed Duma, to adopt the constitutional law “On taking new subject in the Russian Federation”, the first article of which refers to a new subject taking in Russian Federation “by joining foreign country, or its part”, hereby “initiator of the joining is foreign country”.

It's amazing, but the law commits such state, which voluntarily transfers to Russia part of its territory. One can hardly imagine such a state and Georgia would never agree to present its territories to Russia and Russian authorities decided to create such quasi-states as Abkhazia and South Osetia and instantly “recognized” their independence.

Who will be next?