The Conflict In Abkhazia, Georgia: An Assessment

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Honors Thesis

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PASS WITH DISTINCTION
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“Five United Nations observers killed as helicopter is downed by Abkhazia rebels” (Wines 1). This headline may have been the first rude awakening that most people have had to the fact that there is a place in the world called Abkhazia, and that there is something very nasty going on there. And nasty it is. The UN observers killed on October 8th were part of a mission to “keep the peace” in a region which is still embroiled in a highly complex territorial struggle and ethnic clash. “Objectively, Abkhazia identifies one of the most complicated conflict situations in the world, still waiting for its long-sought solution” (International Center on Conflict & Negotiation 3). In this paper we will study that war and determine what the real causes of the conflict are. This is not simply a historical analysis; despite a cease-fire agreement signed by both sides in 1994, the war is not really over. The status of the conflict is very much in flux even at the time of this writing.

Abkhazia is a little-known region of the Republic of Georgia, bordering the Black Sea and and bumping up against the main Caucasus Range. It covers 3,300 square miles of strikingly beautiful landscape, most of which is mountains and seacoast. It is bordered on the north by Russia, and to the south are the Georgian provinces of Mingrelia and Svaneti (“People & Geographic Setting – Abkhazia” 1). In Soviet times Abkhazia was a popular vacation destination for people from all over the USSR. But after the breakup of the USSR, this idyllic setting became the site of a brutal civil war in which the Abkhazians attempted to purge the Georgians from the region. Georgia (of which Abkhazia is officially a part) has been changed profoundly because of it.

The Abkhazian people are related to the Georgians but are a distinct ethnic group, with their own language, culture, and traditions. The Abkhaz are actually a minority,
comprising just over 17% of the population of Abkhazia before the war broke out in August 1992. Georgians made up the largest percentage of the population at nearly 46%; the rest of the region included Russians, Armenians, and Greeks, and small communities of Turks, Ukrainians, and Estonians (Keshelava 255). Such a mix of cultures is not uncommon in that part of the world—in the north Caucasus there have always been many groups of people living near one another. To add to the melting pot, the Soviets often relocated ethnic groups just as a general policy. An Abkhazian academician noted that her people “have always lived by the sea, at the crossroads of culture, communication,” and have always “coexisted with different peoples and different cultures” (Indigenous Conflict Resolution 3). The people of the Caucasus are not the most peaceable ones in the world, and they will tell you unashamedly about the drinking-induced fights that occasionally even end in murder, sparking family feuds that can go on for generations. But a full-scale war is simply not done. There is a delicate balance that is kept, and though they fight, everyone understands that they are all people of the Caucasus, and that is not something to take lightly. From “time immemorial,” one Abkhazian government official explained, “this has been a concern to our people: how others look at us, because after all, we live here together, we share common traditions. That’s why full-scale fighting won’t break out between us” (Indigenous Conflict Resolution 4). So with that sort of history, why did the Abkhaz attempt to wipe out an entire population? The war between the Abkhaz and the Georgians was not fought for any simple reason: it was not about religion or expansionism. It was purely political—a case of hatred and anti-Georgian sentiment in the consciousness of the Abkhazian people, encouraged and manipulated by an outside force: the Russians.
Russian-Georgian relations have never been easy. During Soviet times, Russian leaders were often irritated by Georgia’s staunchly independent attitude and refusal to accept russification of their culture or truly accept the leadership of the Soviet Union. Zurab Papaskiri, the head of the history department at the Sukhumi branch of Tbilisi State University, claims that the seeds of the confrontation were sown “at least during the last hundred years: from the very beginning of tsarist Russia and then the bolshevik regime of the Kremlin did their utmost to arouse anti-Georgian passions and establish favorable conditions for separation of Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia” (Keshelava 133-4). Papaskiri calls the conflict “an ordinary separatist mutiny fully provoked by the Russian imperial forces” (Keshelava 134). These sentiments are echoed by countless historians of both Georgian and Abkhazian descent. It is a well-known fact that Georgia has never wanted to be a part of Russia—it was forced into the empire originally, and has always remained a source of sedition (Dobojginidze). For Russia to keep its hold over Georgia, something was needed to sway the balance just a little more in its favor. A hostile ethnic minority, always “at hand waiting for its hour” provided the perfect solution. The Russians gradually made the Abkhaz into a privileged minority by granting them the best government posts, university scholarships, and career opportunities (“The Role of the Abkhaz-Adig People in Georgian Policy 1). At the same time the Abkhaz were encouraged to see Georgians not as neighbors and relatives, but as deadly enemies who wanted to rob them of their culture and their land. According to Mariam Lordkipanidze, a professor at Tbilisi State University, “the Soviet Government did its best to rouse hatred
between Georgians and Abkhazians. All the privileges were given to Abkhazians in all spheres of the life of the Autonomous Republic. Some Abkhazian ‘historians’ were publishing the books declaring that Abkhazia had been their own land since the ancient time, the Georgians came here later and now they are trying to banish them from their homeland” (Keshelava 113). To further alienate the Georgians from the Abkhaz, Russian leadership discouraged the use of the Georgian language in Abkhazia, sanctioning the Abkhazian language and changing the Abkhaz alphabet to a modified Russian Cyrillic one (Abkhazia: The Language” 1). It is the question of the Abkhazian language that prompted many to believe that the Abkhazian people are not related to Georgians at all, but linked to the ancient Phoenecians (ICCN 16). Linguists and academics from Georgia, Russia, and Abkhazia have been studying this topic for years. It has become an important point of the conflict to determine whether the Abkhaz are related to the Georgians or not, and for many separatists the justification for wanting to secede is that they believe that they are so different from the Georgians, and therefore they do not want to be part of the Georgian state. Separatist sentiment among the Abkhaz people was further inflamed after Yuri N. Voronov published a hypothesis stating that linguistically, Abkhazians are related to the Sino-Tibetan language family, and not at all tied to the Kartvelian, or Georgian, language group (ICCN 18). Over time, hatred of all things Georgian became a common, if not dominant, attitude amongst Abkhazians.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated in the 1980s, and Moscow began to lose its grip on the republics, relations with Georgia became more difficult. Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze “remembered that from the beginning of ninties (sic) in difference from other countries of exunion, Russian-Georgian relations were too tensed”
Abkhazians had been cultivated for years by the Russians, and now that it seemed that there would be a split in the Union, it only seemed natural for the Abkhazians to gravitate toward the northern neighbor who had granted them so much privilege during Soviet times, rather than the “aggressive, covetous” Georgians that they had been encouraged to hate. So, when Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it was only a matter of time before the Abkhazian time bomb went off. And go off it did.

THE WAR

There is one thing that all ethnic groups have in common: the drive for self-preservation. In a small, fiercely proud group like the Abkhaz, surrounded by larger groups of people on its own home territory, that drive was especially strong. A combination of Russian manipulation, Abkhaz nationalist and separatist sentiment, and weakness in the Georgian government led up to the beginning of the war. In the months following independence, the entire country was in turmoil, and out of the tumult Zviad Gamsakhurdia rose to the presidency in Tbilisi (Georgia’s capital). Gamsakhurdia inadvertently managed to incite the Abkhazian separatists’ desire for autonomy by granting them a majority of seats in the Georgian Parliament, which paved the way for a declaration of independence (“Political Situation in Pre-war Abkhazia” 2). The separatists wasted no time in passing bills and resolutions which effectively removed Abkhazia from the jurisdiction of Georgia. Abkhazia then held elections and voted Vladislav Ardzinba in as the new
president (Ardzinba). At the same time, Gamsakhurdia’s controversial allotment of Parliament seats which had given a majority to the Abkhazians created a division amongst Georgians, and soon Tbilisi was divided into two camps: the Zviadists and an opposition group (Tikaradze). Eduard Shevardnadze, an experienced politician as the former Foreign Minister of the USSR, and a Georgian, was called upon to lead his country when Gamsakhurdia was ousted by the opposition. This change in government added more fuel to the separatist fire; Shevardnadze was viewed by some as having contributed greatly to the demise of the great communist totalitarian system of the Russian empire (Keshelava 137). It was at this time, when the Georgian leadership was in transition, that the decision was made which Shevardnadze refers to as a “crime against Georgia” and a gross violation of the state council, who was in charge of government at the time (Parliament of Georgia I). What happened was this: A presidium of four men, serving on the state council during the transition in leadership, decided to deploy some Georgian troops into Abkhazian territory in order to protect a main railway and highway, both of which were being looted regularly by bandits, which was disrupting trade with Azerbaijan and Armenia. In those contentious times, no troops were allowed on Abkhazian soil for fear of inciting an unwanted battle, but this was supposed to be strictly a mission to provide safe transit for goods across the Caucasus. Shevardnadze claims that he had made a preliminary agreement with the newly elected Ardzinba before the troops moved, but that there was simply a lack of communication on that day. On August 14, 1992, Georgian troops entered Sukhumi, the stronghold of the separatists, and everyone’s worst fears were realized as separatists reacted violently. The claim has been made that Ardzinba should be considered a provocateur of the conflict
because he “not only made no attempt to avoid ‘misunderstanding’” on that day, but he also “called up all the population of Abkhazia to unleash ‘civil war’ against ‘Georgian occupants and aggressors’” (Keshelava 134). Blood was shed throughout Sukhumi as the Georgians responded to the attacks. And thus the war began (Parliament of Georgia 1, Tikaradze).

The idea is fairly simple, really: to rule a piece of land easily, a group should be able to form the majority of the population. So for the Abkhazian separatists, their “overall task consisted of changing the demographic balance to their own advantage” (“Demographic Situation on the Brink of War” 1). To make this change, the separatists only had to look to the north, where the Russians were waiting with weapons and promises. The war that began on August 14, 1992, lasted just over a year and resulted in the loss of nearly 10,000 lives, most of them civilians. Reports on the actual number of casualties vary, but Jamlet Babilashvili, the Prosecutor General of Georgia, asserted that “after genocide ethnic cleansing 5,738 Georgians were killed.” Among these were more than 70 children and 706 women, and approximately 50% of the casualties were elderly people. About 600 are still missing (Keshelava 39).

The war, although relatively short, was unusually brutal. There are literally thousands of gruesome testimonies describing the cruelty of both sides. Most of these stories tell of crimes perpetrated against ordinary citizens. After the war ended, intensive research was done in order to prove that it was not just a war— it was genocide. According to the United Nations definition, genocide occurs when a group commits crimes against another group with the intention “to destroy on whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Ethnic cleansing is defined as “a purposeful
policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas." This can be carried out by means of murder, torture, arbitrary and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape, confinement of civilians in ghettos, displacement of civilian population, destruction of property, and deliberate military attacks on civilians (Keshelava 230). The events of the war in Abkhazia, and of the years following, prove that genocide did indeed take place there. The policy of ethnic cleansing that was carried out on the Georgian population "has been officially recognized and condemned by the OSCE summits in Budapest (1994), Lisbon (1996), and Istanbul (1999) (Declaration of the Parliament of Georgia 1). However, the perpetrators of the crimes remain largely unpunished. This is not for lack of proof of the crimes. There is plenty of evidence, not the least of which is the huge number of personal testimonies of the victims.

It is difficult to sort through all of the reports of cruelty directed towards the Georgian population of Abkhazia. Many of the crimes are more horrible than most people could imagine. But it is necessary to understand all that has gone on there in order to assess whether the Abkhaz have attempted to cleanse the majority Georgian population. If the conflict is classified as genocide, it takes on new implications for the UN and other organizations. There is an obligation to punish the criminals in the case of ethnic cleansing or genocide. So the question has been posed time and again: Why does the rest of the world care so much about ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, but continue to ignore the tragedy occurring in Georgia? At an international conference in Tbilisi in 1999, Lamara Nachkebia, a teacher from the Gali district in
Abkhazia (a particularly bloody battleground), summed up this point of view: “It should be noted that the tragedy in Gali District has caused the resentment of the population towards international organizations. We are well aware of... the obligation of the UN observers... But if these observers do their work honestly, why doesn’t the UN assess the crimes of Abkhazian separatists committed against the Georgian population? Why is the UN silent? Why does it make useless and ineffectual statements” (ICCN 67)?

The accounts of the crimes committed in the war are horrifying: burning of elderly women, gang raping of children, decapitations, tying people to tires and setting them on fire, and forcing parents to watch the murder of their children (Keshelava 36). Although it is difficult to sort through, it is important to hear some of the testimonies from the victims of the war and its aftermath. Following are some of their stories:

“In Akhalsopeli, armed Abkhazian groupings shot four Georgian boys, citizens of Gudauta; then they cut off their ears, pulled out their nails and pull their eyes out.” (Keshelava 102) Some citizens of Gagra testified at an international conference that Abkhazian fighters killed a Georgian woman in the following manner: “They first tortured her, set her on a burning hot stove, then cut off her breast, pull her eyes out and then shot her” (Keshelava 102). Another man, whose father was Abkhazian and mother was Georgian, was found at a lake shore, “riddled with bullets, with broken arms and legs, pulled out internal organs, with eyes leaped from their sockets as a result of submachine gun shooting” (Keshelava 103). Another incident has been reported many times: On September 16, 1993, Abkhazian fighters entered the region of Ochamchire and “drove the civilian population into the stadium. They put on tires on the children and set them on fire. They tortured children, undressed them and raped” (Keshelava 103). The
prosecutor general of Georgia, Jamlet Babilashvili, reports that after Sukhumi fell into the control of the Abkhaz separatists in September 1993, some Abkhazians went on a rampage, torturing and killing the Georgians who hadn’t yet left the city. Near a high school in the city, “in front of a beer bar, the drunken Abkhazian and Cossack ‘boeviks’ were kicking the Georgians’ decapitated heads thus having a fun” (Keshelava 35).

Possibly the most gruesome example of barbarism is told by Naira Kalandia, who was caught by a gang of Abkhazians and Chechens while fleeing Sukhumi at the end of the war. She was with her son, whom they killed in front of her despite her pleas to spare him and take her instead. Next, as she tells it, “they dragged me by my hair to the well full of water. There stood 7-8 young man and an old one. ‘Now look what acrobatic tricks your Georgians will play’ they told me and began to drop them alive one by one into the well. It was an unbearable performance and I was a happy mother nevertheless my son had been shot ten minutes earlier because he was already dead and he wouldn’t be put to such torture and humiliation. Someone may ask me – what else could they have done to your son. I tell you that death is not the worst sentence in the world. They struck a young man’s skull off by shooting then made me thrust my face into his brain, then hanged me by my feet with my head down, made me open my mouth and swallow the eyeballs they had put out of that man’s head with a knife” (Keshelava 51).

It is clear that the crimes committed during the war in Abkhazia are intolerable. There are reports of human rights abuses on both sides, and proof abounds that these events did occur. In the end, the Abkhaz succeeded in purging Georgians from the region. For a year after the war officially began in August 1992, fighting raged and ordinary civilians fled if they could. Abkhaz people had to leave their homes as well to avoid becoming victims of the violence. Anyone with ties to Georgians was suspect (Tikaradze). Zurab Papaskiri, head of the history department of Tbilisi State University, describes the senselessness of this fratricidal war. “During the military confrontation one
of the newspapers in Sukhumi published a list of the killed from both sides. It was found out that the representatives of the same family names (the Sichinavas, Chitanavas, Kirias, Dzadzamias, Ivianias, etc.) were killed on both sides of the front line. Those Abkhazians who formerly were Georgians and afterwards changed their nationality, were just among the most well-known Abkhazian boeviks” (Keshelava 135).

The Georgian government reacted to Abkhaz aggression in what some viewed as a strange manner. During the fighting, Shevardnadze never used the word “victory”; he only spoke of desiring “honest completion” of the war. He focused on finding a peaceful resolution, and attempted to use diplomacy, which failed rather miserably. The Abkhaz had the strong support of Moscow; as a counterbalance the Georgians looked for support from the West, which “apathetically watched the events” in Abkhazia (“The War” 1). Finally, on September 27, 1993, the city of Sukhumi fell to the Abkhaz, and they terrorized the city looking to punish the Georgians who remained there still. As the Georgian army pulled out they tried to help the fleeing civilians, who were literally running for their lives the only way that they knew—over the Caucasus mountains into Georgian territory. This exodus out of Sukhumi was a great humanitarian disaster.

PASS OF THE PERSECUTED

Much of the Abkhazian conflict is stories—the stories of how the fighting affected individual people from both sides of the border. To grasp the enormity of this catastrophe, it is necessary to hear these stories. One such story is told by Guram Odisharia, a famous Georgian author, in his book entitled “Pass of the Persecuted.” In the book he tells of September 27, 1993, the day that Sukhumi fell, and the forced exodus
of the Georgian people from that city as the Abkhaz military moved in. Fleeing over the Greater Caucasus Range in late September, without any preparation, hundreds of ethnic Georgians died in their attempt to reach safety. The weather gets quickly worse as one travels the path of the refugees. They left from Sukhumi and followed the muddy roads over the pass towards Zugdidi. With the increase in elevation the mud and rain turned to ice and snow, and people began to freeze to death. The roads in Georgia are in a bad state of repair, to say the least, and the ones leading over the mountains are no different. Cars simply could not make it. So people abandoned their vehicles and continued on foot. A few lucky people owned Nivas, Russian-made jeeps, and they were accosted by friends and strangers alike who were desperate for a ride. Some helicopters were dispatched to transport people over the pass. The refugees on the pass saw them and grew hopeful. But as the days went by there were less and less sightings of choppers. By October 1st, according to Odisharia, only one chopper was seen. “The helicopter chockfull of people crashed into the mountain and exploded,” killing all on board (Odisharia 27).

Ethnic Abkhazian people had to run as well, in some cases. I interviewed a family from Abkhazia who had lived in a village near Sukhumi for generations, and eventually intermarried with ethnic Georgians. Because of their mixed blood, they were considered sympathetic to the Georgians and forced to leave their home. The mother took her two children and fled down the coast on foot, settling in the town of Poti, south of the border. The father, Ramaz, found his family through word of mouth and they are now reunited in Poti, living in a building which houses countless other refugee families. The building is located on the Coast Guard base in Poti and was used to house officers in
Soviet times. It was bombed out at one time and is now missing large sections of walls and ceilings. The cold air can’t be kept out, but the families do what they can to make this wreckage home (Kielpinski). I visited the home of Ramaz and his family, and I found it amazing that despite their difficult situation, they are cheerful and remain hopeful that someday they will be allowed to return to their home.

THE AFTERMATH

The war in Abkhazia was ended with the signing of a cease-fire agreement in 1994 in Moscow, leaving absolute disaster and a lot of unanswered questions behind. The hatred and bitterness between Georgians and Abkhazians will be hard to overcome, if possible at all after a struggle of such remarkable cruelty. Most Georgians view the Abkhaz as thugs who are not worthy of the land that they live on. This attitude was summed up by Dato Kapanadze, when he commented that “there is no reason to go to Abkhazia. The people are worthless and they always will be” (Kapanadze). Abkhazia has effectively seceded from Georgia and is de facto independent, but its government is not recognized by the international community. At various international conferences, a political and economic isolation of the Abkhaz regime was agreed upon (Parliament of Georgia 2). All of the CIS states (including Russia) legalized the economic blockade against the separatists (Keshelava 135). The most vexing problem that remains is what to do with the 350,000 internally placed persons (IDPs) that are living in substandard conditions scattered throughout Georgia.

WHAT MUST BE DONE
The case for Abkhazians committing genocide against the Georgians is well documented. The Budapest and Lisbon summits of the OSCE both formally acknowledged that fact, and their findings were confirmed by the UN Security Council. Numerous military officers from the Abkhaz side, as well as Russians, have testified to the crimes and admitted their purpose, which was ethnic cleansing (Keshelava 137). For example, there are videos of the bodies left behind by the Abkhaz military which show that the victims were tortured—all of the ears are cut off. There is also abundant proof of Russian orchestration of this genocide. There is data that there were small groups of Russians that received combat training in Grozny and then were placed in Abkhazia long before the war broke out. On August 14, the day the war began, it was not a band of ordinary fighters that met the Georgians, but “well-trained officers of the Soviet Army” arriving from the North Caucasus (Keshelava 138). Many Georgians and Abkhaz have testified that the soldiers participating in the war were not volunteer nationalists, but “regular units, specialists, and officers of the Russian army. Georgia was beaten by the aviation and artillery of Russia” (Keshelava 138). Further testimonies assert that together with the Abkhazian fighters, “fully equipped military men with Russian letters “USSR” embroidered on the breast participated in the assault of Sukhumi” (Keshelava 100). Russian officials deny their involvement, but it is difficult to argue with the statements made by the Georgian prosecution, which show that most of the Abkhaz air force consisted of Russian citizens. Everything shot down from the sky during the conflict, including pilots and their gear, came from Russia. The question is, why has Russia not been confronted directly for its role in the genocide?
It is easy to see why Russia would support the separatists. Abkhazia has always leaned more towards identifying with the Soviet Union than with Georgia. So, "it is only natural that in their desire to retain the Soviet Union, Russians supported Abkhazians." ("Demographic Situation on the Brink of War" 1). Abkhazian territory is hugely important to Russia because it is home to the largest and best port in Georgia, Sukhumi. Sukhumi is located on the northwest coast of Georgia and is an important shipping point on the Black Sea. Russia needs access to a good warm-water port, and Sukhumi is it (Kukiadnidze).

THE AFTERMATH
The only real legacies from the war in Abkhazia, however, are the enormous refugee problem (in a country of only 5.5 million there are 350,000 refugees), shattered economies, bitterness between two peoples who used to live in peace, and a series of failed diplomatic efforts (Hess). Abkhazia has not achieved recognition from any country, and what used to be a beautiful and prosperous region is now a "grim picture. The lush nature cannot conceal burned and destroyed houses, schools and kindergartens, looted factories, blown-up bridges, roads and tunnels" (Chirikba 1). Any war is bound to be problematic for the countries involved, but a civil war is particularly devastating. In the case of the Abkhazian conflict, it has completely wreaked havoc on Georgia and its people. The war came at a time when the country was just attempting to reassert its independence after seventy years of Russian domination. Infrastructure is in a sad state to say the least. Supply routes have been disrupted on a fairly permanent basis, and
opportunities for important development have been missed. The loss to Georgia in terms of revenue because of the war has been “immeasurable” (Lane). Transit and trade have been disrupted for so long that the routes have fallen into disrepair, and the things that haven’t fallen apart on their own have been vandalized by bandits. There is no funding in the Georgian government to repair or replace railroads, highways, and telephone lines. The result is that the people simply do without (Westin). A British/American partnership (BP/Amoco) put in an oil pipeline in 1994. The best site for the terminus would have been Sukhumi, but because of the unrest there the companies chose to build the terminus in Supsa, a peaceful village south of the border (Shafiei). The overall damage to the Abkhazian economy is estimated at $100 billion in U.S. prices, and the loss in human capital is much, much worse. The Abkhazian side lost about 5,000 people, most of whom were between ages 18 and 40 (Chirikba).

REFUGEE CRISIS

More than 350,000 people were forced to leave Abkhazia, the majority of them Georgians. They now live in various other countries, but most of them remain in other parts of Georgia. The region of Abkhazia is in the northwest portion of Georgia, so naturally many of the refugees fled across the border but didn’t go much further. The town of Zugdidi, home of UNOMIG and located just south of the border, is a sad place, overflowing with refugees and strapped with poverty and filth.

“The town was a mix of dirty river, shantytowns for the refugees, and beautiful, well-kept western Georgian homes, some of the nicest I’ve seen.” (Journal entry, 8/22/01)

The Georgian government is in a sad state of affairs, and has been since gaining independence in 1991, and it is simply not able to deal with the influx of refugees. The
best that could be done at the time was to offer housing for them in some of the abandoned buildings that were left behind when the Soviets left. These housing arrangements are appalling to Western eyes, and it is a struggle to survive for most refugees. Some are actually starving to death, even now, and nearly all are unemployed (Hess).

Since the end of the war Georgia and Abkhazia have not been able to come to an agreement on any substantive issues related to the conflict. Although the Abkhazian conflict has not garnered much attention from the U.S., it has certainly been at the center of many discussions amongst the countries from that part of the world. There have been several international conferences held to deal with the problem. The Georgian parliament has called upon many international organizations, including the UN, OSCE, European Union, the Council of Europe, and the CIS to “make the best use of all available tools and mechanisms of exerting influence on the Sukhumi separatist regime” (“Declaration of the Parliament of Georgia” 1).

However, relations between Georgia and Abkhazia are not good. The two main issues—repatriation of refugees and recognition of Abkhazian statehood—are items that neither side is going to budge on anytime soon. In the years since the ceasefire was signed, there have been repeated appeals by the UN to come to an agreement. But they have met with no success. The killing continues, although on a much smaller scale than during the war. Politically motivated murder is frequent. Shevardnadze and his Georgian parliament feel that there must be a political solution. “The only way which we have been following and continue to follow for settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia is searching for political methods” (Parliament of Georgia 1). But the Georgians absolutely
do not recognize any sovereignty for the Abkhaz government. In March of this year, the so-called “Sukhumi Separatist Regime” held elections. The Parliament of Georgia issued a statement condemning these elections, stating that “any local self-governance elections on the territory of Abkhazia are illegal and unacceptable because, as the result of the conflict the demographic situation has been artificially changed” (Parliament of Georgia 1). Abkhazian president Vladislav Ardzinba is equally determined. In a letter to Kofi Annan, he asserts: “We are prepared to discuss but one question—the question of the possible mutual relations between two sovereign states of equal rights—Abkhazia and Georgia” (Ardzinba 2).

Because of the complex relations amongst the northern Caucasian peoples, the lingering Abkhazian conflict has the potential to spill over borders and cause trouble between nations. The Abkhazians maintain that if the war resumes Russia, Chechnya, and the North Caucasus “will be on its side and that under the circumstances Georgia will not be able to wage a large-scale war” (“Post-war Policy” 1). Some of the parties involved are Abkhazians, Russians, Georgians, Chechens, just to name a few. The fighting that is going on in Abkhazia has such deep roots and complicated alliances that it has the potential to grow much, much worse. Attempts at mediation are nearly impossible, as outsiders have a difficult time understanding the entire situation, much less gaining any of the respect necessary to be effective. Those involved are so passionate about the situation that there is not much hope of objectivity. The UN has expressed concern a number of times that a solution has yet to be found. In a statement from November 2000, the Secretary General “noted with deep concern the continued failure to achieve a comprehensive political settlement” and urged both parties, “particularly the
Abkhaz side, to undertake immediate efforts to move beyond the impasse” and to spare no effort to make progress (“Security Council Expresses Concern” 1).

UNOMIG (United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia)
The United Nations placed a peacekeeping mission in the town of Zugdidi, which borders on Abkhazia and is only twenty kilometers from one of the most violent regions, Gali. UNOMIG is charged with maintaining the peace in the region, ensuring the safe border crossing of ordinary citizens, and patrolling the mountainous areas for terrorist activity, as well as studying the situation in hopes of coming up with a solution. There is not open fighting in Abkhazia at the moment. The situation is classified in UN terms as “calm but unstable.” The woodlands surrounding the border are filled with bandits, many of whom are mercenaries from various surrounding regions. The danger of kidnapping is high, and travel is sometimes not permitted across the border. Although open fighting has not broken out for some time, there are regular incidents of politically motivated murder. Each time that an Abkhazian is killed, a Georgian is murdered and returned to the mayor’s office in a body bag in the dead of night. And then the Georgian’s family retaliates by killing an Abkhaz, and the pattern repeats itself (Cunningham). UNOMIG regularly patrols the woods in the Gali district looking for incidents of such banditry, but they have not been able to put an end to it. I had the opportunity to visit the UNOMIG compound in August 2001, and met with many of the peacekeepers assigned to that post. The mood seemed to be cheerful, for the most part, and unafraid. The observers seemed to be on good terms with the Georgians who live in Zugdidi, where the base is located,
and they reported good relations with the Abkhaz across the border as well (Cunningham).

UNOMIG: FAILED MISSION?

The actual utility of the United Nations in Abkhazia, however, is questionable. There are various reports of resentment towards UNOMIG, saying that the mission is ineffectual. The obvious question has been posed by many, and here I will quote Tamaz Nadareishvili: “If the world commonwealth considers the Serbs and their leaders punishment for genocide/ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Yugoslavia indispensable, then why is it justifiable to leave unpunished the crimes carried out with more cruelty and mass character in Abkhazia, where more than 300 thousand people have been expelled for their ethnic origin and more than 20 thousand slaughtered” (Keshelava 46-47)? The fact that these crimes have gone unpunished despite constant appeals to the UN and other international bodies has caused Georgians to lose some faith in the diplomacy efforts.

Georgians’ dissatisfaction with UNOMIG is exacerbated by their frustration with the presence of the 2,000 Russian peacekeepers that have been deployed in Abkhazia for several years—especially since most Georgians believe that it was the Russians who instigated the war in the first place (Tikaradze). Georgia has never been happy about having Russian troops on its soil, whether in a “peacekeeping” capacity or otherwise (Kukiadnidze), and there has been a consistent but unsuccessful effort to remove the Russians from Georgian soil.

UNOMIG has the unenviable position of “peacekeeping” in a region where the peace is uneasy at best, and their presence is resented by many. This sentiment was made
painfully clear recently. On October 8, 2001, a Mi-8 helicopter was flying over the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, which is a “wild and essentially ungoverned” area where Abkhaz rebels operate, on an inspection mission. The copter was shot down, killing all nine passengers. Five of those passengers were peacekeepers from UNOMIG, and they had an interpreter from the mission with them as well. They represented France, Pakistan, Switzerland, Germany, and Hungary (Wines 2). It is clear that there is serious resentment of the UN’s presence in Abkhazia, and it needs to be examined. The most important thing is to find out who is responsible for downing the chopper, and why. There are rumors of Chechen rebels, who live just across the Georgian border to the north, dwelling in the gorges in the Kodori region. Some say that they are responsible for the chopper going down. Other possibilities are Abkhazians, a claim that is denied by the Abkhazian military spokesman (Wines 1) and the Russians. In any case, this incident has certainly upset the “calm but unstable” status quo at UNOMIG. All nine of the victims of the crash were well-known around the compound. A British UNOMIG peacekeeper, Major Nick Cunningham, was on leave in the UK at the time of the crash. He stated that he is “pretty upset to say the least,” and has also been told that he cannot return to Georgia “because of further developments” (Cunningham).

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The unfortunate reality is that the Abkhazian conflict has no ready answer. There is no obvious solution that would stop the violence if only we could implement it. The history is long and complicated, and outsiders generally do not fully grasp the intricacies of the situation, and insiders are too passionately involved to be able to step back and negotiate
a solution. There are all kinds of ancient grudges amongst the peoples of the Caucasus, as well as long-standing friendships and loyalties. To understand the conflict, one must understand the character of the people involved. And to negotiate an acceptable solution to the conflict, we must have a grasp of the type of conflict management that will work in that particular part of the world. There have been studies on the Abkhazian way of managing conflicts, and that information could be valuable to diplomatic efforts.

Mediation must stress the importance of a common Caucasian ethnicity rather than the separate cultures. There must be a high level of trust in the mediators to empower them to "essentially dictate the terms of the reconciliation." Even with a trusted mediator, "the reconciliation of antagonistic parties in the Caucasus is impossible unless both sides emerge from the conflict with a sense of dignity" (Indigenous Conflict Resolution 9).

Abkhazians see no reason why they should back down on their demands for sovereignty. They will not recognize any Georgian jurisdiction over them, and even if they decided to do so on a formal basis, it "will mean absolutely nothing. The Abkhaz side fearlessly holds the tough attitude" that "if the war resumes, Russia, Chechnya, the entire North Caucasus will be on its side and that under the circumstances Georgia will not be able to wage a large-scale war" ("Post-war Policy 1). All of the well-intentioned resolutions passed by the UN Security Council have not made a substantial difference in the situation. These attempts at mediation "make the life of Georgian and Abkhazian officials more animated but yield no practical results" ("Post-war Policy 1).

According to Vladislav Ardzinba, Abkhazia does not need the recognition of the international community to maintain its statehood. He asserts that Abkhazia is "facing a great deal of problems, but we do have much potential to solve them" (Ardzinba).
However optimistic Ardzinba is, there is still a humanitarian crisis going on there that requires attention. People are homeless and unemployed in great numbers. Negotiations with the Georgian government are not progressing, and with the economic blockade it is not realistic that there will be much improvement. Without some sort of political settlement, Abkhazia simply cannot move forward.

After years of tit-for-tat fighting, empty promises, and failed diplomacy, the shooting down of the UNOMIG helicopter may finally bring things to a head in Abkhazia. It is high time for Russia to act responsibly to assist in brokering an agreement between the two governments rather than continuing to fan the flames of the conflict. On the 13th of October, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a statement in which he acknowledged the problems in Abkhazia, and said that he would be willing to remove the Russian peacekeeping troops from there if it would help to stop the fighting. He stated that Russia does not want to meddle in Abkhazia; “we have enough problems of our own” (“Abkhazia: Withdrawal Offer” 1).

Putin’s statement may be the first important step in the right direction. The presence of the Russians is a constant thorn in the side of the Georgians. They resent the Russian military being there, since most feel strongly that Russia is directly responsible for encouraging the Abkhaz aggression and keeping them supplied with weapons (Doborjginidze). Since the helicopter was shot down accusations are flying but no one is admitting anything. Relations between Russia and Georgia are cold (Peace). The situation will be changing on a daily basis, and with any luck this time it will move towards a peaceful settlement rather than another outbreak of war.
CONCLUSIONS

There is still much to be learned about the Abkhazian conflict, but some aspects of it have become quite clear. The war was a particularly vicious and hateful one, and the memories are fresh. Ordinary people became monsters as they turned on their neighbors and committed some of the most brutal war crimes in recent history. Each individual is responsible for his own appalling behavior, that much is certain. However, it is clear that these people did not act alone. The “Abkhazian government was provoked to separate from Georgia” with the aim to join it to Russia” (Keshelava 107). Russia deliberately planned this uprising by instigating hate between two peoples who had lived together peaceably for millennia. The “Powers of Russia made supreme efforts to oppose Abkhazians to Georgians” by trying to separate the two linguistically, religiously, and culturally, in order to weaken the republic and ensure its own continued influence there (Keshelava 107). It is also clear that the conflict in Abkhazia, and the events of the following years, were more than an especially violent, fratricidal war—genocide was attempted. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the question of what should be done now. Ardzinba’s government continues to make statements of refusal to compromise, and although the Georgian government has attempted political solutions repeatedly, they simply do not agree on the most basic issues. The legacy left by the war is 350,000 refugees who are still struggling to return to their homes. These people must be allowed to return home safely as soon as possible. The economic ruin in Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, exacerbated greatly by the war, has created more humanitarian
problems that should be addressed even as efforts at diplomacy continue. Russia must be held responsible for its role in the genocide, and immediately remove all of its military personnel and equipment from Georgian territory, whether of a peacekeeping nature or not. It is obvious that Russian involvement has not been successful in bringing peace to the Abkhaz and the Georgians. Renewed fighting in Abkhazia is a concern since rebels shot down the UNOMIG helicopter. If war resumes, the danger is high that it will spill over and embroil larger parts of the Caucasus, which would be tragic for all involved, including Russia. If Putin really feels that Russia has enough of its own problems to contend with, then he needs to remove any Russian military presence in Georgia and take responsibility for assisting with the peace process rather than prolonging the conflict.
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A Note on Research Methods

To find out firsthand what the sentiment is surrounding the Abkhazian conflict, I wanted to be able to speak to people directly. So, I learned enough Georgian to be able to carry on a conversation (however rudimentary) with the locals. I carried a phrasebook, and a Russian one as well. And in this manner I was able to ask questions of the people who live in Zugdidi (the border town on the Georgian side) and of the soldiers guarding the border crossing into Abkhazia.

While in Tbilisi, I met a United Nations peacekeeper from the UK, and received an invitation to visit UNOMIG in Zugdidi. So I went by minibus to Zugdidi, and toured the compound and met the members of the mission. I stayed with a Georgian family and was able to have a long conversation with them about their views on the situation in Abkhazia. They, along with many other families of that region, are disgusted with President Eduard Shevardnadze, and are still strong supporters of the ousted former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. A common belief in that region of Georgia is that Shevardnadze has not been tough enough on the Abkhaz rebels and it is his fault that so many Georgians have been slaughtered.

After interviewing the family in Zugdidi, we went by taxi to the border crossing just north of Zugdidi. Because of the language barrier it was a bit difficult to explain why I wanted to go to the border, and assure the driver that I would not attempt to actually cross it into Abkhazian territory. He was convinced that I would be kidnapped immediately by bandits and never seen again. But, we got out at the border and I approached the Russian guard at the first security level and explained that I was simply
there to talk to people. I was introduced to both Georgian and Russian guards, who seemed to be comfortable working together in that capacity. They were willing to talk to me, but it was not the time or place to ask political questions. However, I had an extensive conversation with a Georgian man, a peasant who was attempting to cross into Abkhazia to get his daughter back and bring her into Zugdidi. He told me that he comes to the border every day, and every day receives the same answer. He is not permitted to cross into Abkhazia, so he remains estranged from his daughter. He warned me not to ask any questions of the soldiers that might bring up political disagreements, which I didn’t, and it was a relatively uneventful experience. Back at the UNOMIG compound I had the luxury of speaking English again, so I was better able to communicate with people and ask them questions.
UNOMIG Personnel Questions

1) Where are you from?
2) What exactly is your job description?
3) How long have you been here?
4) How long will you be here?
5) What do you hope to accomplish/What are your goals for your time here?
6) Do you feel that the UN’s presence here is actually helping to find a solution to this conflict, or is it just maintaining the status quo?
7) Who asked the UN to be here?
8) How do you feel about the conflict? Who do you think is at fault?
9) What is UNOMIG’s relationship like with either side—the Abkhazians and the Georgians? How about the Russians? Are there tensions between the UN and the parties involved, or do they want you here?
10) Do you speak Russian or Georgian? Have you been able to talk to people and hear their points of view on the situation?
11) What is the situation with the landmines here? Are there still lots in the forest? Are they on both sides of the border? Is that part of UNOMIG’s mission—getting rid of the mines?
12) Do you feel personally at risk here? Or is this a fairly safe assignment?
Wednesday morning I got up early to figure out Zugdidi. Bahman had Tea working on it, so she and Bandi took Beam and I to the train station, where we bought tickets for a mashutka to Zugdidi. So, we came back at the appointed time, which was not as early as I would have liked, but oh well. I was just happy to be going. We said goodbye to Bandi & Tea and got in the mashutka... and sat there in the parking lot in the blazing sun for the next 45 minutes. It was a very, very long 45 minutes. I was wedged up against a Georgian man who was reading Russian porn—gross. Beam’s legs barely fit and we were both a little antsy to get going, to say the least. He nearly went home and cancelled the whole thing, but once we got going it was amazing what the forward movement did for morale. We were both a million times happier, with a nice breeze, some music, some good scenery. We didn’t mind the multiple stops we had to make because of the police—our driver was very quick to pay them and get going again. Our driver was great, so I felt especially bad for him when his tire blew out just as we pulled into Zugdidi. And, true to Georgian ways, he just kept driving on it. Hey, the rim rolls, right? Nick & I had no idea where anything was, so we just hopped out at a square and got a cab to the UN compound, quite unsure of what we would find but eager to get to it. I was pretty excited to be right there on the border of Abkhazia, finally. The town was a mix of dirty river, shantytowns for the refugees, and beautiful well-kept western Georgian homes—some of the nicest ones I’ve ever seen. The UN compound is not far from the center of town, and we drive right up to the UNOMIG sign, got out, and asked the guards for Major Cunningham. Just then he called me and seemed happy but surprised to discover that I was there. He came bounding in to greet us moments later and took us on a quick tour of the compound. We saw headquarters of ops, the briefing room with all of the flags and maps of the danger zones, offices, etc. And of course, the bar, where we had a Topadze and met an Austrian, a Spaniard, a Uruguayan, and Jaroslav the Czech. I’ve never seen so many different nationalities in one place. Jaroslav decided that he would look after us, and invited me to a party he was putting on at the compound. His English is like nothing I’ve ever heard before. We all went to dinner, which was cut short because they have a tight curfew. But it was worth it because we got to ride in the UN armored Humvee with the official German driver and everything. And it was amusing to me to be hanging out with the guys while they actually wore the little blue berets. So we chatted with a few more interesting people when we returned, including the German driver and two Pakistanis, and then I ended up speaking Spanish to Milton from Spain. My brain was a total mess of Spanish, English, Georgian, Russian, and British accents. But I love that stuff. Anyway, we went to Nick’s house (in the Hummer again) and watched a DVD on his laptop. He has a sweet house that he shares with another Brit, and a Georgian family lives on the bottom floor. I slept in the sector commander’s room, which I’m not sure I was really supposed to do, but oh well. In the morning I was awakened by Khartuna, which was surprising since it was 7:30 a.m. I went to sleep around 4, but was totally confused in addition to being tired because UNOMIG time is one hour ahead of the rest of Georgia. Plus I couldn’t speak much Georgian at that hour. Nick came in for a minute
but was not much help with the conversation, and then he went to work anyway. They were doing a patrol in Gali. Anyway, Khartuna returned with a note written in English. Rano, whom I assumed was Jaroslav’s host, was offering to take Beam & I to Anaklia in his cab. I managed to say “Tell him to come back at 9:30” so we at least had time to get ready. So off we went at 9:30, not knowing much of anything for sure. But Rano was very nice, and took us to the beach, which was quite beautiful. We all three went swimming and I got stung by a jellyfish for the first time. Then we asked Rano to take us to the border, which he agreed to do after I explained a little more. So that is how we found ourselves at Checkpoint Charlie, attempting to walk across into Abkhazia. I had a great time talking with the Russian and Georgian guards there while Beam walked through the checkpoint (I forgot my passport 😱) The guards thought I was crazy to simply go there to see it, which is understandable, and they had fun teasing me, offering their best advice—Learn all about it! Just get kidnapped! Hmm. In any case, it was well worth the trip. One man told me he couldn’t get across, but kept trying every day because his daughter is still in Abkhazia. The scenery there is very beautiful, lush and green and mountainous. The river separates the regions, and if I had been alone I would have swum across. But, we thanked the soldiers for their patience and went back to Zugdidi and had lunch. Rano picked us up again and we went back to Nick’s house. I sat down and began to talk to Khartuna and her daughter Eka, and the conversation basically never stopped. Khartuna is a superb communicator, and the whole family is great. Eventually the guys came out, but I sat outside at the table, just me and my dictionaries and these incredible people, for a good couple hours. We got into all kinds of politics, which was quite the challenge in Georgian, but that just made it more fun. Inevitably, Khartuna started preparing food, and it led to a Georgian table, complete with chacha, my first experience with that one. It was quite good, really. I was truly sad to leave when the time came, because I felt a real connection with that family. It was fun being a translator for all the toasts as well. But, we had to make the night train, so we said our goodbyes and then the father, whose name I never learned, and Rano took us to the train. We were well looked after to say the least.