

პოლემიკა Discussion

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Abkhazians and Ossetians in Georgia.

Short History

(handout for the politicians)

In the remote past Southwards from the Great Caucasian Range and Eastwards from the Black Sea, like everywhere, rural clans fought each other for a land and the mines making the alliances and early states. Two cultures equipped first with bronze and then – with iron were established finally in the valleys of the rivers Rioni (Phasis), Chorokhi (Aphsaros), and Mtkvari (Cyros/Kura). Roughly, borders of Colchis included city of Pitius (Bichvinta, Pit-sunda) in the North West, Sarapanis (Shorapani) in the East, near the Likhi mountains, which divides Georgia into West and East, and mouth of the river Chorokhi in the South, near Batumi, Georgia's today's main port. Other name for Colchis is Egrisi derived from the tribal name Margali/Megreli/Mingrelian. Mingrelian language, very close to the Georgian, is still spoken in West Georgia as a family one, like that of West Georgian highlanders, the Svani. Next country had two rivers, Chorokhi, now mostly in Turkey, and Mtkvari within its borders. Local folk called it Kartli, and the Greeks – Iberia and Iberians. Latter term contributes to *Ivirk*, *Vrastan*, Armenian terms; also to *Varkan*, *Gurġan*, *Gurġistan*, Persian terms. And the Persian term contributes to *Georgia* and *Gruziya*.

So, Kartli, while comprising Mtkvari and Chorokhi valleys, was labeled as Iberia, or Vrastan, or Varkan, or Gurġan by the foreigners. Gradually, Colchis/Egrisi and Kartli/Iberia were becoming more and more integrated, and Georgian, i.e. language spoken in Kartli, spread at the East Black Sea Coast, putting the Mingrelian and Svani languages at a position of a family language. From that point on this new country has been called Sakartvelo, the term has been

derived from Kartli, and also – Iberia, Gurğistan, Gruziya and Georgia (*T. Dundua. History of Georgia. Tbilisi. 2017, pp. 5-22. v. Academia.edu/Tedo Dundua*).

Still, there has been one more language in West Georgia also converted into a family language, namely, the Abkhazian. Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (Georgia) has Sokhumi as capital. Sokhumi is Turkish version of the Georgian name Tskhumi. And the Greeks called the city Dioscurias and Sebastopolis. Italians did the same. So, people living in its neighbourhood in the Classical and Hellenistic periods are the Colas and the Coraxae, obviously the Colchian clans. Their names are substituted by that of the Colchians themselves. First mention of the Aphsils, obvious ancestors of the Abkhazians, near Sebastopolis/Tskhumi is dated back to the 70s of the 1st c. A.D. Soon their relatives, Abasks, appear. These two names sometimes disappear in favour of Lazi, name of Mingrelian speaking people descended from the Southern mountains, mingling with the Colchians thus changing the name of the country into Lazica. When Northern part of Lazica under the local feudal lords, they again call themselves Aphsils and Abasks, when unified with the rest of the country – Lazi. That means as follows: starting from the 2nd c. A.D. the Mingrelian language is a social one throughout Lazica, while the Abkhazian language has been put in a position of a family language spoken near Sebastopolis/Tskhumi. Indeed, the special Mingrelian term for that part of lazica is *apkha*, i.e. periphery. Periphery of what could it be? That of Mingrelian, i.e. Western Georgian, culture. Gradually, Aphsils and Abasks under the local princes also started to call themselves Abkhazians. When in the 8th c., apparently through the marriage, their prince found himself residing in the central city of Kutaisi, Lazica/Egrisi received one more name – Apkhazeti. With the Georgian language becoming dominant at the East Black Sea Coast, the Mingrelian, Svani and Abkhazian languages found themselves in a position of a family language (*T. Dundua. Christianity and Mithraism. The Georgian Story. Tbilisi. 1999, p. 6; T. Dundua, Akaki Chikobava. Pacorus, the Lazi King, Who Was Overlord of Colchis/Western Georgia. Tbilisi. 2013, pp. 9-16; T. Dundua. Georgia within the European Integration. Tbilisi. 2016, pp. 81-88. v. Academia.edu/Tedo Dundua*).

West and East unified has been called Sakartvelo/Georgia. And the title of the kings from Bagrationi ruling dynasty was as follows: king of the Abkhazians (i.e. Western Georgia), Kartvelians (Eastern and Southern Georgia), Rans and Kakhetians (extreme East of the Eastern Georgia)... (*T. Dundua. Review of Georgian Coins with Byzantine Iconography. Quaderni ticinesi di nu-*

mismatica e antichità classiche. Lugano. 2000. Vol. XXIX, pp. 389-393; T. Dundua and Others. Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics).

Decline of Georgia towards the end of the 16th c. enabled the Ottomans to increase their territory taking control over the cities at the East Black Sea Coast. Georgian frontier defenses were down. Finding so little opposition, many tribes settled in the districts to where they had penetrated, new wave of the Abkhazian speaking clans among them. They made their way from the mountains first to the region of nowadays Sochi (Russian Federation), and then – down the coast towards Bichvinta (Pitius, Pitsunda). Those rough highlanders forced part of the local agricultural folk to flee to the central regions. Thus rural and urban sites suffered much and the links with the rest of the country were badly damaged. Besides, the Ottoman overlords encouraged the slave trade. That completely changed the economic visage of the Northwest of the Western Georgia for centuries before the Russians advance against the Ottomans in the 19th c. (*T. Dundua. North and South (towards the Question of the NATO enlargement). www.nato.int/acad/fellow/99-01/dundua.pdf, pp.41-42; T. Dundua and Others. The Black Sea – Zone of the Contacts. Tbilisi. 2001, pp. 9-10, 15-16; T. Dundua and Others. The Black Sea. A History of Interaction. Teaching Pack. The Council of Europe. Oslo. 2004, pp. 46, 105. v. Academia.edu/Tedo Dundua).*

Russian Empire annexed Eastern Georgia, Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, in 1801. This paved the way to the Russian expansion into Western Georgia. In 1810 Abkhazian prince Giorgi (Safar Beg) Shervashidze swore allegiance to the Russian Emperor whereas in 1864 Russian governance was established over the territory (*Abkhazia in the Late 18th-Early 19th Centuries. Entry of Abkhazia Under the "Protection" of Russia. in Essays from the History of Abkhazia. Tbilisi. 2011, pp. 300-305*). Sukhumi military department was founded (*M. Lordkipanidze. The Abkhazians and Abkhazia (Georg., Russ. and Engl. texts). Tbilisi. 1990 http://www.amsi.ge/istoria/div/m.lordkiPaniZe_afx.html#90*).

Although the process of separating Abkhazia from Georgia was actively supported by the Russian authorities, still Abkhazia was a natural and integral part of Georgia. Perhaps, it was for this reason that the Sukhumi military district was soon included in the Kutaisi governorate. Despite of negative effects of Russian imperial policy, in 1918, the year when the Democratic Republic of Georgia was founded, Abkhazia was a part of Georgia (*M. Lordkipanidze. The Abkhazians and Abkhazia (Georg., Russ. and Engl. texts). Tbilisi. 1990 http://www.amsi.ge/istoria/div/m.lordkiPaniZe_afx.html#90*).

On June 11, 1918, an agreement was signed between the people's council of Abkhazia and the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Georgia where

Abkhazia as a part of Georgia gained autonomy.

After the end of the Georgia's short independence in 1921 Abkhazia remained within Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia under a special union agreement, as a treaty republic, a certain type of autonomy within Georgia. In 1931 Abkhazia officially became Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) of Georgia (*Political Status of Abkhazia within the Soviet Georgia. 1921-1937. in Essays from the History of Abkhazia. Tbilisi. 2011, pp. 419-436; Революционные комитеты Абхазии в борьбе за установление и упрочение Советской власти. Сборник документов и материалов. Сухуми. 1961, p. 350 (Революционные комитеты Абхазии в борьбе за установление и упрочение Советской власти. Сборник документов и материалов. Сухуми. 1961, p. 350)*). This remained unchanged till the end of the Soviet Union. According to the 1989 Soviet census, the total population on the territory of the ASSR of Abkhazia was 525 061, of whom 239 872 were ethnic Georgians (45.7% of the population), while 93 267 were Abkhazians (17.8%) (*S. Markedonov. Abkhazia: Historical Context. in Abkhazia Between Past and Future. Prague. 2013, p. 18*).

Abkhazia enjoyed cultural and scientific benefits as part of Georgia during the Soviet era. Abkhazian language was taught at the schools, and university.

Since 1993 Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is occupied by the Russian Federation (*for the full length narrative about Abkhazians v. Z. Papaskiri. Abhaziâ: istoriâ bez fal'sifikacii. 2e izd. Tbilisi. 2010 (with Engl. summary) (3. Папаскири. Абхазия: история без фальсификации. 2е изд. Тбилиси. 2010 (with Engl. summary)*).

Next region occupied by the Russian Federation is Autonomous District of South Ossetia.

The Ossetians started settling in Georgia beyond the Caucasian range in the 16th-17th cc. as fugitives.

After annexation of Eastern Georgia by Russia in 1801 their villages were attached to the Gori district of the Tbilisi governorate.

In 1920 the Russian Bolsheviks supported Ossetians living in Democratic Republic of Georgia, in the mountains North from Gori, to establish the Soviet power there and declare the territory as a part of the Soviet Russia. This was an abortive attempt.

In February 1921 the Soviet Russia violated the agreement of May 7, 1920 by militarily attacking the Georgian state and eliminating its independence. In April 1922 the Bolsheviks granted so-called South Ossetia the status

of autonomous district within Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia. Soviet policy can be regarded as a premeditated attempt to disrupt future attempts of the Georgians to gain independence and build a stable state. Separatism within Georgia would constrain Tbilisi in its actions. Autonomous District of South Ossetia consisted of some Ossetian settlements and a purely Georgian town Tskhinvali.

Thus in 1922 Autonomous District of South Ossetia was created in the heart of historic Georgian lands where the Georgian population represented the majority of the population.

It also needs to be emphasized that throughout the Soviet period (till 1991) the Ossetians living in Georgia were granted all necessary legal rights as an ethnic minority. Then Georgia became independent and the Russian occupation of Autonomous District of South Ossetia started (*M. Lordkipanidze, G. Otkhmezuri. Ossets in Georgia. in The Caucasus and Globalization. Vol. 1 (4). Sweden. 2007, pp. 109-118; R. Topchishvili. Ethnic Processes in Shida Kartli (the Ossetians in Georgia). in Causes of War – Prospects for Peace. Georgian Orthodox Church. Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation. Tbilisi. 2009, pp. 111-138*).