

# Discordant Neighbours

*A Reassessment of the  
Georgian-Abkhazian and  
Georgian-South Ossetian  
Conflicts*

George Hewitt



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*By*

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*Cover illustration:* Whilst the map on the front-cover delineates the frontiers of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, the areas in green represent the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as recognised by Russia (26 August 2008) and five other UN member-states; red indicates the territory subject to the writ of the Georgian government and thus the reduced frontiers of today's Republic of Georgia.

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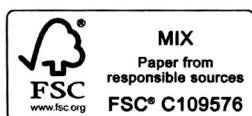
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## Discordant Neighbours

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Strange as it may seem, for they are amongst the wildest mountains on earth, the one thing you feel most about the lonely places of the Caucasus is a deep personal tenderness, a brotherhood; and the aching wish, vain as you know it to be, that you could guard their rare beauty. They “possess” you. Once you have felt the spell of the Caucasus you will never get over it.

(Negley Farson, *Caucasian Journey*, London:  
Evans Brothers Ltd., 1952, pp. 13-14)

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABL	Administrative Boundary Line
ANS	Abkhazian National Soviet
ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
ATM	Automated Teller Machine
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNN	Cable News Network
CoE	Council of Europe
CPF	Collective Peacekeeping Forces
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CUG	Citizens' Union of Georgia
DPO	Development Policy Operation
EEC	European Economic Community
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FOG	Friends of Georgia
GPB	Georgian Public Broadcasting
GTEP	Georgia Train and Equip Program(me)
IA	International Alert
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IIFFMCG	Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMO	International Maritime Organisation
IPRM	Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
KGB	State Security Committee (according to its Russian title)
MAP	Membership Action Plan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCG	National Council of Georgia
NFA	National Forum of Abkhazia

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
RFERL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SC	Security Council
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SMK(')	Citizens' Union of Georgia (according to its Georgian title)
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
SSOP	Sustainment and Stability Operations Program(me)
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
TACIS	Technical Aid to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TGU	Tbilisi State University (according to its Russian title)
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations' Development Program(me)
UNHCR	United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations' (International) Children's (Emergency) Fund
UNOMIG	United Nations' Observer Mission in Georgia
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation
US(A)	United States (of America)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



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## PREFACE

Hopes were high in many quarters that the *New World Order*, as President George Bush Snr. characterised the epoch dating from the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, would herald an era of freedom and prosperity across the former Soviet space. But in the Caucasus, one of the world's most alluring places on the fringes of Europe, there was to be no smooth transition to the state of peace that is an essential precondition for the establishment of any such nirvana. South of the great Caucasian mountain-range, war had already broken out in 1988 between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh (Artsakh to the Armenians); disputation between Georgians and Ossetians over what was at the time Soviet Georgia's Autonomous Region (*avtonomnaja oblast'*) of South Ossetia had descended into armed conflict in late 1990/early 1991; and tensions were rising in Soviet Georgia's Autonomous Republic (*avtonomnaja respublika*) of Abkhazia, following the fatal ethnic clashes there in July 1989. All-out war was to ensue in Abkhazia on 14 August 1992, whilst, to the north of the mountains, even greater loss of life would be witnessed in the two rounds of savage warfare between Russians and Chechens that erupted first in 1994 and again in 1999; nor should one forget either the hostilities between the neighbouring Ossetian and Ingush peoples over rights to the Prigorodnyj District or the later (and ongoing) problems that have scarred such other parts of the Russian Federation's North Caucasus as, for example, Daghestan and Kabardino-Balkaria.

Despite considerable attention from the world's media during the periods of actual fighting, once the three Transcaucasian hotspots (viz. Nagorno-Karabagh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia) had achieved *de facto* independence, interest in both them and the internationally recognised states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia that were involved in the relevant conflicts largely tended to wane, reviving only on the occasion of flare-ups in hostilities. Georgia returned to prominence in November 2003, when its leader Eduard Shevardnadze (firstly as an orthodox communist from 1972 to 1985, and then from 1992 in the guise of a born-again Christian and democrat), who had achieved worldwide fame upon his appointment in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev as the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was ousted by his former protégé, Mikheil Saak'ashvili, who was formally elected president of Georgia in early 2004. However, it was the

short (five-day) Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 in and around South Ossetia, with lower-level military activity in Abkhazia that nevertheless had important local consequences, which really concentrated minds on Georgia and the territories in dispute with it. These conflicts form the subject-matter of the present volume.

A number of publications touching upon Abkhazia and South Ossetia have already appeared on the market. Those seeking a general introduction to the entire area of the Caucasian isthmus will find reward in the works of Charles King (2008) and Thomas de Waal (2010), which latter, dealing mainly with the Transcaucasus, has the advantage of having been composed after the events of 2008.<sup>1</sup> Ethno-nationalism in the Islamic states of (primarily) the North Caucasus is the focus of the contributions to the collection edited by Moshe Gammer in 2008.<sup>2</sup> Political scientists keen to detect some theory at work in the unfolding of history might discover appropriate stimulation in the analytical offerings from Jonathan Wheatley (2005) and Christoph Stefes (2006). Though written when Saak'ashvili was only about a year into his first presidential term, Wheatley's survey of Georgia from national awakening to Rose Revolution reads like a virtual manual in how not to build a functioning state. Stating that a regime is defined by (pp. 3-4):

a) the diversity and characteristics of those actors who belong to the political élite as well as the rules, both informal and formal, that govern decision-making within the élite, b) the capacity of the political élite to penetrate society either by means of repression or by legitimization of one form or another, and c) the extent to which ordinary individuals and social forces independent of the state are able to influence state decision-making,

he then defines the key challenge as: “[u]nderstanding how and why political regimes change and the way structures and actors interact to bring about institutional change” (p. 7) and proceeds to examine the relevant years in Georgia's development against this framework. Stefes, on the other hand, compares and contrasts post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia in terms of corruption, collusion and clientelism. He proposes a typology of

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<sup>1</sup> De Waal had already written about the North Caucasus when examining the first Russo-Chechen war (1994-96) in the 1997 book that he co-authored with Carlotta Gall. Vicken Cheterian (2009) surveys all of the wars that have broken out in the late/post-Soviet period, whilst Frederik Coene (2009) also aims to provide a general introduction to the region, perhaps appealing especially to those concerned with conflict-resolution.

<sup>2</sup> The journalist Oliver Bullough (2010) recounts his encounters with North Caucasians, both within and outside the region itself, adding his account of various historical events that have disrupted and disfigured that area's different constituent parts.

corruption that differentiates the *non-systemic* from the *systemic*, the former category being either *incidental* (based on individuals) or *sectorial* (more widely distributed through networks in certain areas of society), whilst the latter encompasses *centralised* and *non-centralised* varieties. The thesis that he then aims to substantiate throughout his book is that Armenia exemplifies a centralised systemic patterning, whilst that in Georgia is of the decentralised systemic type. However worthy and relevant such approaches might be, any reader expecting an interpretation of the conflicts that form the focus for this volume that is couched in terms of their being the likely or even inevitable outcome of this or that aspect of the socio-political particularities of Soviet and/or Georgian society will be severely disappointed, as this work is a wholly theory-free zone. It is written in the simple (some will no doubt say simplistic) twin beliefs that facts, as facts, need to be made known, especially when they have been so often deliberately distorted, misrepresented and misreported over the years, and that human actions are not necessarily predetermined by the nature of the society in which they live. Perverse intentions, illogical argumentation and immoral behaviour should always be susceptible to correction by the application of logic and common sense. And, when an ethnic group senses that its very survival is at stake, full-scale resistance is surely all that counts, regardless of the nature of the socio-political ambience.

History is a central component of the claims put forward by all sides in the various debates, and the Russian ethnologist Viktor Shnirelman in 2001 set himself the intriguing goal of contrasting the generally accepted body of basic historical facts about each of the three Transcaucasian hotspots with the range of arguments advanced over the decades by local writers and/or historians and/or archæologists about their own side's past and the relevance of these to the perceived strengthening of their nation's claim to the respective disputed territory. The reader is almost left with the impression that, whether motivated by plain naivety, centrally imposed ideology, or, most chillingly, the (frequently self-defeating) demands of local patriotism, many authors whose ideas are discussed by Shnirelman have effected a weird transformation whereby creative writers have all too often become the drivers of local historiography, whilst some of the best examples of fiction are to be found in the textbooks penned by professional historians.

One cannot deny that there is a certain amount of overlap between a number of the aforementioned titles and parts of the present work. However, as far as I am aware, not one of the above-named authors (or

most others who now present themselves as experts on Georgian affairs) can claim mastery of the Georgian language and thus (most importantly) direct acquaintance with the internal Georgian debate on relevant themes in the primary vehicle in which it is conducted. And, thus, we come to my motivation for writing this book and to the reason why its general thrust and conclusion differ from most of what has been written over almost a quarter of a century on the topics of, principally, Abkhazia and, secondarily, South Ossetia.

While spending the academic year 1975-76 in Georgia learning Georgian as a Cambridge postgraduate benefiting from the British Council's exchange-programme with the USSR, I travelled to Abkhazia on 1 April 1976 to spend a month in the capital extending my linguistic studies of Abkhaz. Before returning to England, I married a native speaker of Abkhaz. Though my early publications were more concerned with Abkhaz than Georgian, I nevertheless always considered myself at heart a georgianist and continued to extend my knowledge of, and research into, the language through both a second exchange-sojourn in Tbilisi (1979-80) and extensive reading. The materials devoured included newspapers sent from an organisation in Tbilisi set up to sustain and develop contact with Georgians born and living overseas. Thanks to the consolidation of Gorbachev's policy of *perestrojka* in the late 1980s, topics began to appear in print that had been embargoed for decades, and one eagerly awaited the arrival of each new delivery. But it was not long before the unimagined Soviet freedom seemed to mutate into licence, whereby articles of increasingly disturbing content began to be printed. It was as if the long, ill-concealed resentment (to put it no more strongly) felt by many (?most) Georgians at their two-centuries long subordination to Russia was being vented upon their own republic's ethnic minorities, who, if the chauvinistic rhetoric continued, might be expected to react accordingly towards their Georgian overlords. By including copious representative citations from such outpourings in my own translations, I hope to give readers the opportunity to reach the same conclusion that I reached even before the breakup of the USSR.<sup>3</sup> And that

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<sup>3</sup> This was well before the names of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had become familiar in the West and at a time when mention of 'Georgia' would probably have conjured up an image only of a state in America's south in the minds of most people outside the Soviet block. Needless to say, the number of Westerners competent in Georgian during the late Soviet period was small, and I would doubt if any was following what was being written about Georgia's minorities, in particular the Abkhazians, with the interest and concern that I, for obvious reasons, had. The editor of a collection of papers that first appeared as a special issue of *Central Asian Survey* (volume 28, number 2, 2009) but which was subse-

is that, whilst it would undoubtedly be naïve to suppose that Russia will at all times have played only the part of a passive observer, the Georgians' persistent and insistent asseveration that all their country's ills (especially those relating to Abkhazia and South Ossetia) are the direct consequence of the Kremlin's manipulation is a misrepresentation of the facts of the cases, for Abkhazian and South Ossetian actions were, I maintain, essentially reactive in nature. These peoples responded in entirely predictable ways to the (at best) offensive and (at worst) threatening verbiage and actions emanating not from Moscow but from Tbilisi, for which none but the Georgians themselves can be held responsible. In addition to contemporary familiarity with those Georgian sentiments that, as it transpired, were indeed raising alarm in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, I happened to be present in Abkhazia at the time of the clashes in July 1989 and throughout the following weeks of heightened tension; I was also there during the critical events of 2008. The opinion that I expressed in print in an article published in a Georgian newspaper on 21 July 1989 in what was my first engagement with the then incipient crisis had previously become known and appreciated throughout Abkhazia, even if 'appreciation' is hardly the word to characterise the eventual reaction that it provoked amongst its Georgian readership. As a result, documents and information started to flow into my possession from the Abkhazian side. Indeed, as a regular visitor to Abkhazia over the years since 1976, I have been able to amass many materials from Abkhazian (and, to a lesser extent, South Ossetian) sources which, considering the wartime-destruction of Abkhazia's main library and archives, it would be difficult for other interested parties now even to locate, let alone consult. These too have played their part in contributing to the present work.

It is undeniable that most of what has been written in the West about these conflicts since they erupted in the dying years of Soviet power has been sympathetic to the Georgian side, though, as time goes by, more observers do seem persuaded that there can be no question of Abkhazia

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quently transformed into a book, the historian Stephen Jones (2011), certainly had the linguistic competence (and possibly the opportunity) to acquaint himself with the materials that were causing me ever mounting concern. However, his edited volume, though touching upon the conflicts covered in this book, mostly focuses on issues pertaining to the events of August 2008 and post-Soviet Georgia more generally rather than on the specifics of the breakdown in Georgian-minority relations in the dying days of the Soviet Union. Like Wheatley (2005), in his latest volume, announced for 30 July 2012, Jones examines Georgia over the turbulent years 1991 to 2003 and is sure to give his own opinion, as will Rayfield (2012), of the conflicts treated in the following pages.

at least returning to the Georgian fold. What follows, whilst incorporating the Georgian argument(s), aims to provide a much-needed platform from which the Abkhazian and South Ossetian voices (often unheard or ignored) can be projected. After taking these into account, readers should be better placed to reach a more nuanced conclusion about the rights and wrongs of the two conflicts at issue than that which has become the prevailing wisdom would have them believe. If this volume can serve as such a corrective, then its purpose will have been achieved.

Doncaster-Sukhum  
Summer 2012

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

After an introductory survey of the Caucasus, its peoples and the countries of central concern to our specific topic, we turn to the relevant historical questions. It is simply impossible to understand much of the arguments between the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians, on the one hand, and the Georgians, on the other, unless one has a grasp of the past. And, as we shall see, the build-up to the wars (1990/1-92 in South Ossetia; 1992-3 in Abkhazia) was characterised by frequent references to history — indeed, the historical debate today is as heated as ever it was. Much of the material for pre-1993 Abkhazia is drawn/adapted from my own 1993 article. Developments under the three post-communist Georgian leaders (the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, Mikheil Saak'ashvili) are described, and a discussion of Western involvement is incorporated. The conclusion draws all strands together, presenting both an assessment of the arguments and recommendations for the future.

## NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

All the native Caucasian languages are notorious for some degree of phonetic complexity. One common feature is the presence of ejective consonants, where the basic sound (plosive, affricate or fricative) is accompanied by closure and release of the vocal chords (producing in effect a glottal stop). Such sounds are conventionally represented in linguistics by an apostrophe,<sup>1</sup> and, as the Georgian sound-system can be easily and accurately captured by deploying this diacritic, it is used in appropriate contexts; the letter /q/ indicates that the plosive concerned is articulated against the soft palate, somewhat further back in the mouth than the point at which English 'k' is articulated. In rendering proper names the sequence /kh/ represents the back voiceless fricative of the English (Scottish) word

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative practice, employed by armenologists and, sadly, in the Library of Congress scheme, leaves ejectives unmarked but then adds a reverse apostrophe to the non-ejectives (aspirates). Some publications, such as Times Books' 'Atlas of the World', thinking they are following this tradition, use an ordinary apostrophe instead of the reversed one and thereby simply manage to confuse their readers.



*loch* (the voiced counterpart being conveyed by /gh/), though in transcription of book/article-titles /x/ is used. The sequence /ch/ is to be pronounced as in English *church*, whilst its voiced counterpart is rendered by /dzh/, though by /j/ alone in the conventional spelling of the country *Azerbaijan*.

When it comes to representing Abkhaz, the challenges are far greater, but, as this work is not designed for linguists and any attempt to capture the complexities of the language's phonetics would probably cause some mystification and thus detract from the flow of the narrative, I have decided to take the Russian version of proper names as the basis for transcription,<sup>2</sup> though in the Bibliography any Abkhaz material is suitably rendered, with full marking of labialisation and palatalisation, for linguists to grasp the nature of the original. The neutral vowel (schwa) is indicated in the Bibliography by /ɪ/, whereas in the body of the work I use /y/ (e.g. *Apsny* in the text vs *Apsnu* in the Bibliography).

When discussing the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, sometimes the mere choice of one particular form of a toponym commits the speaker/writer to supporting this or that side. Take the capital of Abkhazia. This is most widely known as Sukhum or Sukhumi. The Soviet norm upto 1936 was Sukhum, but the year of Stalin's Soviet Constitution saw shifts in the designation of some Abkhazian toponyms, and, as part of these changes, Georgian's nominative case-ending /-i/ was added to the capital's designation. Abkhazia has understandably reverted to the pre-1936 norm, resulting in those who strive to avoid commitment having to write Sukhum(i); its omission tends to imply adherence to the Abkhazian cause, whilst its presence immediately signals sympathy for Georgia. An even stronger mark of support for the Georgian case is to employ the full Georgian toponym /soxumi/.<sup>3</sup> One way of avoiding having to make a choice, though perhaps indicating partiality of the opposite kind, is to use the native Abkhaz term Aqw'a (strictly Aq'w'a).<sup>4</sup> The form 'Sukhum'

<sup>2</sup> The spelling of the surname Lakoba conforms to this practice, but, as one holder of this surname published two articles in my 1999-edited book with the spelling Lak'oba, this spelling too appears, and sometimes rendition is thus by the form Lak[']oba.

<sup>3</sup> Georgian has no capital (upper case) letters in its alphabet.

<sup>4</sup> This native Abkhazian term is first attested with certainty in the description of the Caucasus published originally in German in the 1790s by Jakob Reineggs; in volume I of the English translation of 1807 we read of the fortress of *Saghumi* "which, if it was better kept up, might be considered as the key of western Caucasus, particularly as it is protected by Agua or Aku, a strong post, situated on a rock, composed of brown Trapp in the form of stairs" (Reineggs 2005.1.327). But there is speculation that a coin of Alexander of Macedon, thought to have been minted in Colchis (K'ap'anadze 1950.28) and carrying on the reverse