

TOM TRIER, HEDGIV LOHM, DAVID SZAKONYI: *Under Siege. Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia*. xi + 159 pp., maps. London: Hurst & Company. 2010. £25.

The more information provided to Western audiences about Abkhazia and its dispute with Georgia, the better, so that attitudes and policies can be predicated on facts rather than ignorance, as has regularly been the case. But not all works are necessarily (wholly) accurate in what they present to their readers. The present volume is a mixture of wheat and chaff, and the latter could easily have been winnowed out prior to publication.

Abkhazia achieved *de facto* independence from Georgia at the end of September 1993 after a 14-month war. Though official recognition was granted by Russia on 26 August 2008, and since then by three other states, most of the international community is not (yet) prepared to acknowledge Abkhazia's *de iure* status. This needed to be stated once in the Introduction; but inserting the words '*de facto*' each time the country or one of its governmental posts is mentioned soon irritates the reader.

The authors' fieldwork was conducted in 2007, and, unfortunately, some of their statements are out of date. Though I would advise those unfamiliar with the region to look elsewhere for background to the current situation, what the authors have to say about their central concern of inter-ethnic relations is perceptive and pertinent. Recognising the achievements made by Abkhazia, despite years of international sanctions and blockade, the authors address a wide range of issues that the authorities will eventually have to tackle. And, given the multi-ethnic makeup of Abkhazia's population, the problems facing the Abkhazians do not solely concern relations with those remaining from the pre-war Kartvelian population, who are mostly Mingrelians largely confined to the southernmost province of Gal and whom, in line with norms in Georgia, the authors style Georgians.

Whilst the threat from Georgia might have receded under conditions of security-guarantees from Russia, the construction of a civil and democratic society that is inclusive of all the ethnic groups discussed in this book (including, even if many Abkhazians are reluctant to contemplate this, the Kartvelians) presents a huge challenge. Abkhazians must not make the same mistake as did late-Soviet Georgia in antagonising its ethnic minorities. It is pointed out that the linguistic, cultural and civil rights of all have to be protected, and questions are raised as to how this can be accomplished in the context of the existing Constitution and laws on citizenship and property-rights. Also, many Abkhazians still think in terms of ensuring

such rights primarily for themselves, which is understandable when one recalls that Abkhaz is an endangered language and the associated culture thus under threat; with regard to the status of the Abkhaz language, the authors are probably correct to point out that the aspiration to have it replace Russian as the *lingua franca* across all spheres of public life by 2015 is overly ambitious (p. 59). Though no longer under total blockade, severe financial constraints still apply. Western recognition would allow for the inflow of welcome investment and expertise to advance improvements, and not just in the fields of human and minority rights, as recommended on p. 80.

The book's Conclusion contains a series of valid observations, and, overall, the authors have managed to identify a number of critical areas where action on the part of the Abkhazian authorities is desirable — indeed, the government could find in these pages a useful shopping-list of measures for it to consider implementing. The statistical data included are a particularly valuable resource.

When discussing what has become known as 'the war of the linguists and historians', the authors assert: 'The clash of historiographic discourses already took place during the Soviet era (especially from the late 1970s), and erupted partially as a consequence of the Soviet approach to the study of history' (p. 21). This emphasis on context verges on providing an excuse for those who deliberately distort local history.

The most egregious lapses derive from a failure to grasp the difference between Abkhaz(ians) and Abaza/Abazinians. Footnote 44 asserts: 'According to linguists and ethnographers, the main feature that differentiates the Abkhaz from the Abaza is the letter 'kh' ('x' in Cyrillic), which was added by Tsarist authorities, who were interested in severing the close connections between the sub-groups on either side of the Caucasian mountain ridge' (p. 40)! The inclusion of such 'information' is simply inexcusable. The fact is that, though both standard Abkhaz and Abaza were awarded literary status during Soviet times and thus have their own Cyrillic-based alphabets and literatures, they are basically members of a single dialect-continuum. Abaza is, however, so divergent that speakers of standard Abkhaz cannot easily understand it.

A further fundamental misunderstanding relating to the term *Abaza* emerges in the interpretation of Article 5 of Abkhazia's 1995 Law on Citizenship (amended 2005). We read (p. 82): '[A]ll persons of "Abaza nationality" have the right to obtain citizenship, regardless of their place of residence.' The authors then assert that 'the designation *Abaza* is usually

understood to include Abkhazians, Abaza (Abazins) and Circassians (Adygs, Kabardins, Cherkess and Shapsugs)', alleging that citizenship has been bestowed on all such North West Caucasians. In fact, the relevant Article refers to persons of 'Abkhaz(ian) nationality', the term *Abaza* being added in brackets to emphasise the fact that Abazinians are to be included within the Abkhaz(ian) category; this is especially important amongst the (largely Turkey-based) diaspora, where Abkhaz(ians) and Abazinians are not sharply distinguished. However, whilst those among the diaspora of Ubykh descent (Ubykh being the third — along with Abkhaz-Abaza and Circassian — North West Caucasian language, which is now extinct) are also entitled to claim Abkhazian citizenship and, thus, own property within Abkhazia, Circassians (e.g. Adyghes, Kabardians, Cherkess, Shapsughs, etc..) are not. The rationale is that Circassians have home-republics in the North Caucasus (Russian Federation), whilst the Abkhazians have only (tiny) Abkhazia and the Ubykhs have no eponymous administrative unit of their own to which they might aspire to return.

Post-2009 Vice-President, Aleksand(e)r Ankvab, will be shocked to read that he does not speak Abkhaz (p. 12); he withdrew his 2004-candidacy for the presidency rather than submit to the indignity, as he saw it, of having his spoken competence appraised by a committee.

GEORGE HEWITT

To be conveyed to the publisher but not included in the printed review:

Errata:

p. 4 line 9 up: 'Ingur' is the Russian name of the river dividing Abkhazia from Georgia; the Abkhaz term is 'Egry'; p. 20 Footnote 6 & p. 28 Table 1: *apxazetis mosaxleoba, osebi sakartveloshi*; p. 25 Ft. 19: *apxazetis mosaxleoba*; p. 37 l. 5up: number (not amount); p. 77 l. 15: Giorgi (not Gueorgui); p. 80 l. 2up & p. 153 l. 1up: Achba (not Archba); p. 87 l. 4: renounce (not denounce); p. 131 l. 17: renamed; p. 134 l. 2: them (not whom); p. 147 l. 24: Babushera.

Further linguistic observations:

The Abkhaz name of the inland mining town is normally presented as *Tkuarchal* (more accurate would be *T'q'warchal*), but on Map 2 it mistakenly appears as *Tkhuarchal*. Since Georgian does not possess the sound [f], it is perverse to use this letter instead of the correct /p/ in transcriptions like **afxazebi da afxazeti* 'The Abkhazians and Abkhazia' (p. 20). Why use the Russian word *mamalyga* [sic] to refer to the Abkhazians' staple-food hominy when the Abkhaz word *abysta* is available (p. 105)? The Georgian equivalent is not *rhomi* but

ghomi. The surnames *Zugba* and *Zugbaia* (p. 111) should be written *Tsugba(ia)*, in the same way as *Tsu[g]ba* (p. 109). Referring to the Roma people as ‘Roms’ is idiosyncratic. The Georgian word *lazuri* is the adjective referring to a Laz non-human entity, when they write of Laz being ‘spoken among Lazuri in northeastern Turkey’ (p. 51) — the correct Georgian form would here be *lazebi*.