Below I shall try to give a short review of the history of Abkhazia and Abkhazian-Georgian relations. No claims are made as to an in-depth study of the remote past nor as to any new discoveries. However, I feel it necessary to express my own point of view about the cardinal issues of Abkhazian history over which fierce political controversies have been raging and, as far as possible, to dispel the mythology that surrounds it. So much contradictory nonsense has been touted as truth: the twenty five centuries of Abkhazian statehood; the dual aboriginality of the Abkhazians; Abkhazia is Russia; Abkhazians are Georgians; Abkhazians came to Western Georgia in the 19th century; Abkhazians as bearers of Islamic fundamentalism; the wise Leninist national policy according to which Abkhazia should have been a union republic, and Stalin's pro-Georgian intrigues which turned the treaty-related Abkhazian republic into an autonomous one.

Early Times to 1917.

The Abkhazian people (self-designation Apsua) constitute one of the most ancient autochthonous inhabitants of the eastern Black Sea littoral. According to the last All-Union census, within the Abkhazian ASSR, whose total population reached 537,000, the Abkhazians (93,267 in 1989) numbered just above 17% - an obvious ethnic minority.

With some difference in dialects (Abzhu - which forms the basis of the literary language, and Bzyb), and also in sub-ethnic groups (Abzhu; Gudauta, or Bzyb; Samurzaqano), ethnically, in social, cultural and psychological respects the Abkhazian people represent a historically formed stable community - a nation. The Abkhazian language belongs to the Abkhaz-Adyghe, north-western group of the Ibero-Caucasian language family. This group, along with Abkhazian, includes the Abazin, Adyghe, Kabardino-Circassian and Ubykh languages spoken by the kindred peoples of the Northern Caucasus: the Abazins, Adyghe, Kabardians, Circassians, and Shapsugh -united under the common name of Adyghe.

The language and ethnocultural closeness with the Adyghe does not mean any isolation of the Abkhazians from other peoples of the Northern Caucasus and Transcaucasia. From ancient times particularly close cultural and genetic ties linked the Abkhazians with Georgian tribes, their immediate neighbours in the eastern Black Sea littoral. This is confirmed by the archaeological remains of material culture (in particular, by the diffusion of the Colchian culture of the Bronze and Early Iron Ages throughout the territory of Western Georgia, including a large part of the present-day Abkhazian Autonomy), Georgian-Abkhazian ethnographic parallels, mutual borrowing of lexical and morphological elements in the languages, numerous coincidences in place names, etc. Even the earliest mention of the ancestors of the Abkhazians in Assyrian Sources under the ethnonyms Abasgoi and Absili (or Apsili) in classical authors, in particular Pliny the Younger, Arrian and other Roman sources of the first and second centuries, are also in permanent correlation with the listing of various tribes of Kartvelian origin (Mingrel-Chan and Svan). So, ancient Georgians lived with ancient Abkhazians on common land, engaging in complex ethnocultural interaction. The antiquity of origin and length of residence of the Abkhazians in this land is acknowledged by historical science: the idea that they are newcomers is out of the question. In the Abkhazian national mentality home is rightly felt to be this strip of rich land (8,600 square kilometers) between the Greater Caucasus Range and the Black Sea shore. It is bounded by the river Psou in the north-west and by the Inguri in the south-east, covering the woody slopes of the Caucasus mountains and the sub-tropical zone of the Kolkheti lowland, which, according to the administrative division of the USSR, was over the decades officially designated the Abkhazian ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) within the Georgian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic).

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The right of the Abkhazians to consider this land to be their historical homeland - the ancient arena of their ethno genesis - is beyond all question. However, any ideas that their ancestors were the only inhabitants of this
land, and that there are no ancient roots of Georgian culture here, are absolutely erroneous and illusory.

The point is not only that the boundaries of the settlement of the Abkhazians in ancient times and throughout the Middle Ages were vague and transparent, but that they suffered considerable change and were eventually defined quite arbitrarily as the borders of the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic. This claimed to be a state created on the basis of the right to national self-determination of the Abkhazian ethnus, though the Abkhazians constitute an ethnic minority on this territory.

In the Georgian national mentality this land is also rightly considered as their own territory, an organic part of the Georgian people who have lived here from time immemorial, formed their culture, gave their names to the mountains and rivers, towns and villages, fought side by side with the Abkhazian people against common enemies and were subject to common kings and princes. In the dramatic peripetia of ancient and mediaeval history this, of course, did not rule out a shifting alignment of forces when related tribes and close neighbours fought against each other and argued over land, faith, crown and booty. Be that as it may, in 1917 on the territory of the future Abkhazian ASSR the Georgians totalled 42.1 % of the local population, and the Abkhazians 21.4%. So, not only by virtue of historico-cultural association, but also ethnodemographically this land should be considered part of Georgia.

From the 6th century B.C. the territory of Abkhazia belonged to the most ancient Colchian kingdom of Western Transcaucasia, the heyday of which was in the 4th century B.C. This was the first attempt to unite all local tribes into a single ancient Georgian state. After the disintegration of the Colchian kingdom (2nd century BC), its territory became dismembered and its western lands of the Black Sea littoral, including Abkhazia, were captured by Mithradates VI. (The Kingdom of Bosporus also became part of the Kingdom of Pontus at the end of the 2nd century B.C.) Eventually the Greeks were replaced by Roman legionaries, and already in 64 B.C. the lands of Abkhazia and Colchis together with the Pontic kingdom found themselves within the Roman Empire.
The local tribes waged a persistent struggle against Roman domination. Among the first to secede from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire was Western Georgia where, at the end of the 4th century A.D., the Kingdom of Lazica (or Egrisi) came into being, comprising the territory of present-day Abkhazia and Ajaria (Atchara). Ancient Georgian tribes, known under the name of Laz, were by no means the only inhabitants of this multatribal and multilingual state. Unfolding in an endless struggle and with frequent wars both with late Rome and with the new powerful empires of Byzantium and Sasanid Iran, which sought to extend their domination to the eastern Black Sea area, the dramatic history of Lazica was a common landmark in the process of the becoming of both Georgian and Abkhazian statehood and early Christian culture. However, the processes of the diffusion of Christianity among the peoples of the Transcaucasia were not absolutely synchronous. Georgia is considered as having become christianized from 337, and Abkhazia much later - from 523.6. In the sixth and seventh centuries Western Georgia together with Abkhazia was within Byzantium and was actually the arena of incessant wars: between Byzantium and Iran for dominance on these lands, between the confederated local tribes and their Constantinople rulers, and between the warriors of the Caliphate invading the Caucasus and the forces opposing them such as the Khazars. At times the Arabs concluded temporary alliances but these soon broke up.

Towards the 730s an early feudal Abkhazian principality was formed as a stable union of Abkhazian and Georgian tribes. This principality consolidated its power in the battle of Anakopia (736), which put an end to Arab aggression. At the end of the eighth century the Abkhazian state freed itself from Byzantine vassalage, and the Abkhazian prince Leon II received the title of Abkhazian king (with the active help of the Khazar Khanate (with which Leon was related through family kinship: his mother was the daughter of the Khazar Khan). The Abkhazian kingdom comprised the entire territory of Western Georgia, including Lazica. Its population was made up of Abkhazian (the minority) and Kartvelian Georgian tribes (the majority: the Laz, Mingrels and Svans). At this period these tribes respectively contributed to the formation of the Abkhazian and Georgian nationalities. The capital of the kingdom was Kutaisi, and the whole territory extending from Nikopsia in the north to the Tchorokhi (in modern Ajaria) in the south, and from the Black Sea in the west to the Likhi (Surami) Range in the east. It was divided into eight principalities - Saeristavos: Abkhazian, Tskhumi (the old Georgian name of Sukhumi), Bedian, Svan, Racha-Takverian, Gurian, Kutaisian and Shorapanian.
The Abkhazian kingdom reached its acme in the ninth and tenth centuries (under Giorgi II and Leon III), becoming a powerful united state, polyethnic in population, with a prevalence of Georgians and Abkhazians - and a developed feudal society with a high culture. As correctly stressed by Stanislav Lakoba, referring to the studies of Academician G.A. Melikishvili: "the kings of Abkhazia carried on active constructional work, erecting numerous churches, including those in western Georgia (Martvili) and even in southern Georgia (Kumordo) ...; the capital of the Abkhazian kingdom, Kutaisi, became the capital of united Georgia, retaining this status for more than a century..."
In 978, after the death of the childless Teodosi, the dynasty of the Abkhazian kings and the kingdom of Abkhazia came to an end. However, the development of Abkhazian culture and statehood naturally continued within the broader, united Georgian state. The first to come to the throne was Bagrat III Bagrationi (978-1014) whose father was Georgian and mother Abkhazian, sister of Teodosi. Subsequently, throughout the Middle Ages, the process of the integration of Abkhazia and Georgia intensified in the political, economic, military and cultural aspects. It became traditional to conduct joint military campaigns of the Abkhazians and Georgians against aggressions threatening the Georgian kingdom, coming from the Seljuk Sultanate (the battle of Basiani 1205), the Abbasid Caliphate, and - with the expansion westward of the Empire of Genghis Khan and the Genghisids - from the Tatar-Mongol hordes whose invasion created a threat to the Christian civilization of Transcaucasia.

In the fifteenth century, Georgia, weakened by cruel feudal wars, disintegrated into several kingdoms and principalities (Kartli Kakheti, Imereti, Samtskhe-Saatabago, Mingrelia, Guria and Abkhazia) which became the object of rivalry and wars between the Shah's Iran and the Sultan's Turkey (16th-18th centuries). After a short period of prosperity for the independent principality of Sabediano (1470-1475) unifying Mingrelia (Odishi principality), Guria and a considerable part of Abkhazia, Abkhazia came under the dependence of Turkey and for almost 300
Three centuries of Turkish rule failed to break the primordial historical ties of Georgia and Abkhazia. Even the spread of Islam in Abkhazia did not become a barrier to Georgian-Abkhazian cultural and historical unity. Georgia, where Islam penetrated, affecting part of the Georgian ethnic proper (Georgian Adjara as well as the south of the country: Meskhet-Javakheti), and some of the peoples and national groups settled there (Azerbaijans, Turks, Tatars) did not show religious intolerance towards the heterodox-Muslims or any other religious minorities. As to the Abkhazians, the new religion did not have a profound effect on their culture and national self-consciousness. Characteristically, the article Abkhazians in the encyclopaedia Narody Mira gives the following note: ‘Believers: Muslim-Sunnites and Orthodox Christians.’

Actually, orthodox Christians are relatively few, and the mass spread of Islam began as far back as the Tatar-Mongol period with the penetration of the Golden Horde influence and the Empire of the Timurids (14th-15th centuries). It gained force in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries when Abkhazia was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and was completed during the Caucasian war and the Mahajir movement (mass emigration of Muslim
Abkhaz during the nineteenth century under Tsarist rule. This altered considerably the demographic balance in the area. However, there has always been an indifference towards religion in general - a rather rare phenomenon in the East. Characteristically enough, there are actually no significant monuments of Islamic architecture on Abkhazian territory, though they abound in the neighbouring Northern Caucasus, the Crimea and even the Middle Volga Area (Bulgary, Kazan), to say nothing of such regions as Azerbaijan and Central Asia. The percentage of active believers among the Abkhazian population is very low. Suffice it to say, for example, that in Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, for more than half a century there has never been a single functioning mosque, and nobody worried about it. Generally speaking, the Abkhazians could be considered heathen-pantheists rather than monotheist-Muslims or Christians.

It is safe to say that the Abkhazians do not feel any particular 'co-religionist' closeness either to their Christian neighbours (Georgians, Greeks, Armenians, Russians and particularly Cossacks who appeared in the Caucasus in the 19th century), nor to their Muslim neighbours Turks, Crimean Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and peoples of the Northern Caucasus). All demonstrations of solidarity or division occurred here, at least over recent centuries, on any other basis save religion. The religious division of most Abkhazians (Muslims) and most Georgians (Christians) did not lead to a rupture of their long-standing and stable ethnocultural ties or to any other political complications.

The fate of Abkhazia and Georgia in face of the spread of the power of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus proved to be common. They entered this Empire stage by stage with the conclusion by the Russian autocracy of separate treaties with local kings and princes. These were often then broken by the Russians as, for example, the shameless breach of the terms and principles of the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk. The annexation of Georgia was carried out in parts, these colonial seizures being screened by a seemingly voluntary incorporation of separate territories into Russia. Elements of voluntariness did occur at all levels - from the ruling elite to the popular masses.
were still alive that it would be easier with the Russians, and that the white Tsar would liberate them from the Turkish yoke and the imminent threat of Persian conquests. Nevertheless, this was a common and equally sad fate for both Abkhazians and Georgians. They could not withstand the onslaught of the Russian Empire and the conquest of the Caucasus.

The ideologues of anti-Georgian political movements in Abkhazia, and primarily the leaders of the Slav Home, are particularly fond of stressing that Abkhazia joined Russia in the nineteenth century independently of Georgia and voluntarily. In his Essays on the Political History of Abkhazia Stanislav Lakoba writes in this connection: "As regards the Abkhazian principality (excepting the free Abkhazian communities of Aibga, Pskhu, Dal, Tsabal, etc.), it entered the patronage of the Russian Empire on February 17, 1810, as an independent state political unit. The Emperor Alexander I royally endorsed on that day "the points of appeal of the Abkhazian sovereign prince" the first of which reads: "I, the legitimate heir and sovereign of Abkhazia... am becoming the subject and entering the service as a hereditary subject of the All-gracious Autocrat of all Russia ...." Thus, from 1810 to 1864 the Abkhazian principality was part of the Russian Empire with the status of autonomy."

Voronov builds an entire historico-mythological structure on the theme of a Russian-Abkhazian idyll. 'Slavic-Russian presence in Abkhazia', he writes, 'is attested from the 6th century A.D. Appropriate contacts developed after 965, with the establishment of the Tmutarakan principality in the north-western Caucasus. The Abkhazians supported Yuri Bogolyubski at the end of the 12th century; mediaeval Novgorod women of fashion combed their hair with combs of Abkhazian boxwood' (some historical argument!). In the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries the Abkhazians rendered assistance to the Zaporozhye and Don Cossacks in their inroads into Turkey. The commencement of the process of talks on Abkhazia's entry under Russian protection and the participation of the Abkhazians in the actions of Russian troops date back to the beginning of the 1770s. In 1806 the sovereign prince of Abkhazia, Keleshbei Shervashidze, resumed talks on Abkhazia's entry under Russian protection which soon cost him his life. In 1810 the Emperor Alexander I granted an investiture charter to Keleshbei's son Giorgi, according to which Abkhazia came under 'the supreme protection, power and defence of the Russian Empire'. The Abkhazian autonomous principality, transformed into the Sukhumi department in the 1860s, then into a district, was under Russian administration till 1917.12 Thus in a nonsense version of history Abkhazia was under the power and protection (of Russia), and there were no national tragedies, no Mahajir movement, no national-liberation struggle of the Abkhazians with Tsarism, only the tenderest Slavic-Russian presence, a peaceful process of talks, and the unity of the Russians and Abkhazians in military actions. Zurab Achba borders on political delirium when he declares: "Abkhazia is Russia. We can produce documents. Being a free and independent state we entered Russia in 1810. And we have never changed our choice ... I was baptized by an old Russian woman named Manya... According to the constitution of 1925 the state language of Abkhazia became Russian..."

This version of history which presents the incorporation of Abkhazia into Russia as an act of historical progress that put an end to the Turkish yoke and liberated the Abkhazians from a constant fear of invaders is developed by the authors of Ethnopolis14, published by the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation.
It is necessary to shatter this myth and lay stress on the fact that there was no voluntary, progressive, independent-from-Georgia joining of Abkhazia to Russia; furthermore there was no autonomous Abkhazian principality within the Russian Empire. The conquest of the Caucasus was part of the colonial policy of the Russian Empire and various means were used in this policy, ranging from the exercise of military power to diplomatic deception and comical acts of bequeathing or presenting lands and bribing princes and nobles, the vast population having nothing at all to do with any of this. Dismembering the states to be annexed, playing on the clan, religious, dynastic and other contradictions, and seeking to set Christian and Muslim peoples against each other, Russian autocracy advanced in the Transcaucuses slowly, step by step annexing lands and countries, conquering its peoples, constantly alternating bloody violence with promises and acts of royal charity and tenderness to the new loyal subjects. Russia did not manage to annex Georgia straightaway, the same being true of Azerbaijan and the Northern Caucasus. She had to crack and grab Georgia in parts: the kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti in 1804 - the Kingdom of Imereti and the Gurian principality in 1810 - the Abkhazian principality, and only in 1878 - Ajaria (Batumi district) was wrested from Turkey and made part of Russia. At the same time expulsion began of Muslims residing on lands from Kars to Batumi. Georgia did not cease to be Georgia because of this, and the tragedies of all the peoples incorporated and subjugated by the Russian autocracy differed very little from one another. For the Abkhazian people this incorporation did not mean a mythical liberation from a constant fear of invaders, for it had not lived in constant fear, and its history was quite different until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nor did it bring illusory autonomy (autonomy was out of the question in autocratic Russia), but the most brutal economic oppression, and moral and political humiliation. Not wishing to endure this condition, the Abkhazian people responded to the attempt at bringing it into the citizenship of the all-gracious autocrat by taking part in the Caucasian war and, after its defeat, by the mass tragic exodus of the Mahajir movement when thousands of Abkhazians left for exile in Turkey.

'This famous Caucasian war', writes A. Avtorkhanov, 'began back in 1817 and ended ... in the capture of the
outstanding commander the Imam Shamil. No other war of conquest of alien peoples cost Russia so many casualties as the Caucasian war, and its duration (55 years) is in general unprecedented in the history of colonial wars. It began under Alexander I, continued throughout the reign of Nicholas I, and ended only under Alexander II.11

In his work Russia as a Multinational Empire, Andreas Kappeler brings to light the real purposes of Russian autocratic colonial policy in the Transcaucasus which was considered to be 'a colony inhabited by uncivilized asiatics' and which, according to the 1873 decision of the Imperial State Council, was to form a single body with Russia and to bring the local population to a point at which it spoke Russian, and thought and felt in Russian. He emphasizes the exceptional importance of the 'protracted war of the freedom-loving peoples of the Caucasus against the attempt to dominate them (the fact that small Muslim peoples waged such a long war with the mighty Russian giant became a symbol of anti-colonial resistance for many years - up to the Afghan war of the recent past'). Kappeler notes that whereas in the war headed by Shamil, Chechnia, Daghestan and Ingushetia were his main support, the peoples of the Adyghe community (Circassians) did not share their Islamic fanaticism and were not in a hurry to rally to the banner of the Hazawat or holy war against the infidels. After the defeat and capture (1859) of Shamil, when the resistance of the Eastern Caucasus seemed to have been crushed, the Russian colonisers had to face an enhanced resistance of the Circassians or, to be more precise, all the peoples of the AdygeKabardino-Abkhazian community in the Western Caucasus.' Acting to some degree independently from Shamil and sharing muridism and its postulates only to a small extent, Circassian tribes nevertheless offered successful armed resistance to the Russian troops for decades. They relied on support from Ottoman Turkey with which they had long-standing links. Having defeated Shamil, Russia brought her entire brutal power to bear on the Circassians, and from 1864 she controlled the whole Caucasus, including its western edge. Populating the Black Sea Coast and the fertile foothills of the Caucasus with Christian colonists, Russia destroyed the Circassians and drove them from their native lands. Some of them were exiled, others fled from Russian domination and emigrated voluntarily. In the 1860s-1870s, almost all the surviving Circassians (at least 300,000) emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. In 1897, there were 44,746 Circassians left in Russia. (According to other sources, the number of the Circassians that emigrated in 1860 reached two million.) The majority of Abkhazians linguistically related to the Circassians also emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. This emigration occurred in several waves during the nineteenth century... It was a tragedy which in a certain respect anticipated the forced deportation of peoples in the twentieth century.'16

Both the Georgians and the Abkhazians reacted to this strengthening of autocratic, social and national oppression with revolts, peasant uprisings, and political disturbances (the revolt in Abkhazia or Lykhny in 1866, which was cruelly suppressed by the tsarist troops under the command of the Governor-General of Kutaisi - Svyatopolk Mirsky). Mass actions of the Abkhazians in support of Turkey during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 caused fresh brutal repressions: by Royal Decree of 31 May 1880 the entire Abkhazian people were officially declared guilty, and thousands of Abkhazians were exiled to eastern and northern provinces of Russia, the wave of Mahajirs reaching 50,000. Central Abkhazia from the Kodori river to the Psyrtskha was almost completely deserted, as well as the lands once populated by Abkhazians in the Adler, Gagra, Sukhumi, and Gulripsh districts.

Furthermore, as noted by contemporaries, 'there was an order that Abkhazians should not settle in places between the rivers Kodori and Psyrtskha'. The Memorandum on the Colonization in the Sukhumi District, drawn up by its commander Colonel Brakker in 1895, clearly shows for whom these lands were intended. The memorandum reads: 'It is desirable to save as much free land as possible for the settlement of exclusively native Russian people.'11 A little earlier Alexander II endorsed the plan drawn up by his Vice Regent in the Caucasus, Prince Michael Romanov, which envisaged the settling of the territory from the mouth of the Kuban to the river Inguri by Cossacks.11 So much for the close historic ties unifying Russia and Abkhazia.

Not a trace was left of the illusory independence of the Abkhazian principality, the last sovereign of which in 1823-1864 was Prince Mikheil Sharvashidze (Chachba), a representative of an ancient Abkhazian aristocratic family. He had been granted the rank of general for his outstanding service to the Emperor. Georgia was divided into Tiflis and Kutaisi gubernias (provinces). In 1864 the Abkhazian principality was renamed as the Sukhumi military department. Broadened in 1868 through the inclusion of Pitsunda and Ochamchire districts, it existed till 1893 when it was transformed into the Sukhumi military district and was included in the Kutaisi military governorship. From 1904 till 1917 Gagra and its environs were excluded from the Sukhumi military district and subjected to the Sochi military district of the Black Sea coast province on the initiative of Prince Oldenburg, a relative of the Emperor. The concept of Abkhazia was restored only after the overthrow of Tsarism and the disintegration of the Russian Empire.
It should be stressed that from ancient times Abkhazia emerged as a constituent part of Georgia. The ethnic Abkhazians as well as the Kartvelian tribes proper (the Karts, Egrians, Svans, and others) made a contribution to the birth of Georgian culture and statehood - common and unitary for this region. The integration of Abkhazia with other territories was due to geopolitical conditions and to the interests of the peoples. Here reference is not to a union of two different states isolated and opposed to each other. If small Abkhazia, occupying a narrow strip of the Black Sea littoral, had become a barrier to the powerful state drive of Georgia to the Black Sea, she might have been crushed by that larger and stronger state. However, in union with Georgia, Abkhazia preserved her ethnohistorical space and identity. Since ancient times all this land has been the zone of contact of the Georgian and Abkhazian ethnoses (tribes, nationalities, nations in the making). Historically the culture of the region was formed as a Georgian national culture with many common principles and parameters, despite the linguistic and religious peculiarities of the peoples inhabiting it.

The Abkhazian Kingdom of the ninth and tenth centuries and the united Georgian Kingdom, experiencing its heyday in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were, irrespective of the change of dynasties, structures of Georgian statehood. The tragedy of Georgia's disintegration into separate feudal principalities was a common tragedy of both the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples, for the disintegration was followed by attacks of enemies, predatory wars, occupation, break up of the common cultural zone, gradual annexation and finally colonization with all its tragic consequences including mass repressions and deportations. Both big and small nations in the Caucasus, Muslims and Orthodox believers, mountaineers and plainsmen, became victims of Russian autocratic colonial policy and Russian imperialism, hypocritically covering its real aims under its civilising or Christian missionary activities.

In this common calamity neither the Abkhazians nor the Georgians had any advantage over each other, nor is there any moral foundation to calculations of who fell victim to deceit or aggression earlier or later, who suffered more and
1917 to 1931

The fate of the Abkhazians, Georgians and other peoples of the Caucasus was roughly the same. Even after the Revolution of 1917 the first sigh of hope, a brief dawn of freedom, and attempts at self-determination were followed by bloody Bolshevik terror. The Bolsheviks were particularly merciless to their flesh and blood and their close neighbours. Lavrenti Beria, who hailed from Mingrelia, Western Georgia, destroyed on his own initiative more than ten thousand of his fellow-countrymen, Mingrelians, and annihilated the pick of the Abkhazian nation, including its Bolshevik leadership of the 1920s and early 1930s, headed by Nestor Lakoba. For several decades the Georgian and Abkhazian peoples equally came under the grip of the Soviet empire with its operetta autonomous and Soviet republics deprived of real rights of self-determination.

Abkhazia had her own hell in this common nightmare - perhaps not the most terrible if one recalls the harder fate of the deported, punished peoples. However, this was small consolation for the people whose bitter resentments and national suffering accumulated over the decades. And this is the system to which the Abkhazian separatists wish to belong!

The most absurd thing to do is to represent the Soviet period in the history of Abkhazia in terms of the vulgar scheme proposed by Voronov: at first 'on the ruins of the Russian state system and culture (though unbelievable, it reads so!) there arose the Georgian Democratic Republic. (though unbelievable, it reads so!) there arose the Georgian Democratic Republic. The latter immediately occupied Abkhazia, the occupation lasting from 1918 till 1921. Then the Russian Red Army liberated Abkhazia, and the republic of peasants and workers, liberated in this way, acquired the status first of an independent, then of a sovereign Soviet socialist republic linked with treaty-based relations to Georgia. But Joseph Stalin began to hatch malicious and cunning intrigues against the Abkhazians from Moscow and, under his pressure, Abkhazia was included in the Georgian SSR as an autonomous republic. '20 This kind of history is just incredible.

In reality the overthrow of tsarism and the Russian February Revolution of 1917 gave a powerful impetus to the rise of the national-liberation movements of all the peoples of the former empire. In the Sukhumi district on 10 March 1917 a Committee of national security, headed by Prince Shervashidze, was set up. New bodies of the Provisional Government, soviets of deputies (representatives) as well as national movements, parties and unions came into existence everywhere, to be the Union of the United Mountaineers of the Caucasus, founded in May 1917 at the First Congress of Mountaineers in Vladikavkaz. These bodies were formed by the revolutionary energy of the masses and their striving to break away from the grip of the empire and to find new forms of their own statehood. The Sukhumi Committee of National Security conducted its activities in contact with the democratic organisations of Georgia and Russia. In particular they showed considerable interest in the Union of the United Mountaineers of the Caucasus. The Abkhazian delegation attended the congress at the aul of Khakurinokhabl near Maikop in August 1917, where 'the question of the attitude of the mountaineers of Kuban region to the Abkhazian people' was considered; and in October 1917 the delegation was in Vladikavkaz where the setting up of the South-Eastern Union of Cossack Troops and the Mountaineers of the Caucasus and Free Peoples of the Steppes was announced.

On 8 November 1917 the Abkhazian People's Soviet was formed at a congress of the representatives of the Abkhazian people in Sukhumi. In the Declaration adopted at the congress the task was given to this Soviet 'to carry on work towards the self-determination of the Abkhazian people.' The concrete forms of such self-determination were not yet specified. Meanwhile the October coup in Petrograd and the Red Terror launched by the Bolsheviks created a palpable threat to democratic reforms in all regions of the country.

The Transcaucasian Sejm (under the chairmanship of N.S. Chkheidze) convened in Tiflis (now Tbilisi) on 10 February 1918 and, expressing the interests of all the peoples of this region, Abkhazia included,” adhered to the policy of establishing the Transcaucasian Federal Republic, independent of Russia: the Republic was proclaimed on 22 April 1918.

However, Abkhazia was one of the first regions in Transcaucasia to arouse an insatiable appetite in the Kremlin leaders and strategists of the 'World Proletarian Revolution', and to come under the attack of the Bolsheviks. She had to live through her first 'cursed days' as early as 16-21 February 1918, when the Military Revolutionary Committee headed by Efrem Eshba seized power in Sukhumi. The brutality and excesses committed by the Revolutionary Black Sea sailors (from the battle-cruiser Dакia and the torpedo-boat Derzki) made the inhabitants of the sea-shore shudder with horror. The first attempt to establish Soviet Rule was brought to nought by the Abkhazian People's Council which demanded the liquidation of the illegitimate Military Revolutionary Committee.
In the spring of 1918 the Bolsheviks made a more disastrous and protracted experiment in the Sovietization of Abkhazia which had been turned by the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (VChK) into a shooting-ground of execution and torture. Beginning on 8 April to 17 May, the Bolsheviks controlled the whole of the former Sukhumi district (with the exception of the Ochamchire area). At this time, the forces of the Abkhazian People's Council were not sufficient to liberate Abkhazia. The Georgian National Guard under the command of V. Jugeli joined the battle against the Bolsheviks. They acted in accordance with the mandate given by the Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic - the common state - in which the Abkhazian People's Council legitimately represented the population of the region. By 17 May Abkhazia had been cleared of the Bolsheviks. How little the operation undertaken by the Georgian National Guard resembled 'a bloody occupation' about which myths are being circulated by the present ideologists of Abkhazian separatism, is testified by members of the Abkhazian People’s Council (D. Alania, M. Tarnava, M. Tsaguria, and others). In their letter of 29 September 1919 addressing the Georgian Government they wrote the following: "For the first time Georgian troops appeared in Abkhazia during the fight against the Bolsheviks. This was the National Guard under the command of V. Jugeli and A. Dgebuadze. It gives us pleasure to note the impartiality and correctness with which the National Guard treated Abkhazia's whole population. It should be borne in mind that by 1918 the population of Abkhazia included 21.4% Abkhazians, 42.1% Georgians, 11.7% Russians, 11.7% Greeks, 10.2% Armenians and 2.9% of other nationalities.

Meanwhile, in the late spring of 1918, the days of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federal Republic were numbered. Thrown into a state of unrest by the advancing civil war and international turmoil (the Transcaucasian Sejm refused to accept the conditions of the Treaty of Brest), it was a very fragile, insecure political instrument, too feeble to be able to express and reconcile the various interests and desires of Transcaucasia’s population.

So on 25 May 1918 the Georgian Democratic Republic was proclaimed (followed by the formation of the independent republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia), initiating the process of the consolidation of Georgia's independence and restoration of her statehood within her historical borders. The inclusion of Abkhazia in the political structure of the Georgian Republic was determined by the long traditions of their common statehood and also by the agreements reached on the eve of the opening of the Transcaucasian Sejm (on 9 February 1918) which envisaged the autonomy of Abkhazia within the borders of Georgia. It was also precipitated by the situation that had been created by the end of May 1918, when Abkhazia, liberated from the Bolsheviks for the second time, was actually part of the Georgian state and could defend herself only through the military aid of the Georgian National Guard.

This state of affairs was legally fixed by an agreement signed by the Government of the Georgian Democratic Republic and the Abkhazian People's Council on 8 June 1918. The agreement gave Abkhazia internal autonomy (self-government) and military aid in case of external aggression.

Considering these facts, all talk about Abkhazia's annexation or occupation by the Georgian Mensheviks is absurd. However, it would be incorrect to draw too idyllic a picture of the existing situation. The restoration of the single Georgian-Abkhazian state in the extreme conditions of nationwide disaster and imminent civil war progressed with great difficulty. Many mistakes, provocations, delusions, and crimes committed by political leaders of various orientations hindered this process, leading it into a deadlock of aggravating contradictions.

Bringing army divisions into Abkhazia 17-22 June 1918, and occupying the whole sea-shore from Tuapse to Sochi, General Mazniev (Mazniashvili) formed, as one might think, an indispensable beachhead against the Red Army threat, but unexpectedly this aggravated the situation in Abkhazia. The military command of Mazniev (he was appointed governor-general and commander of Sukhumi garrison) ignored the Abkhazian People's Council, oppressed the local population and violated the autonomous rights of Abkhazia, guaranteed by the agreement reached on 8 June 1918.

These Abkhazian-Georgian difficulties were exploited by both the Red Bolshevik S23 and organisers of the Whites whose ultimate goal was the restoration of 'one and indivisible Russia'. In Sochi General M.S. Alexeev, commander of the Voluntary Army (Dobrovoltsy), received and attentively listened to the Abkhazian delegation whose request was to liberate Abkhazia from the armed intervention of Georgia. These complaints served as a good pretext for the general to start a war and bring back the lost territory under Russian rule. Vorobiev, one of the participants of this September meeting, a representative of the Kuban Cossacks, was quite outspoken about it: 'The question arises as to what motives the representatives of the Georgian Republic had when they seized the purely Russian Gagra area and Sukhumi district and, despite the demands of the commanders of the Voluntary Army - the representatives of great, one and indivisible Russia -and of the Abkhazian people, refused to clear this territory of their military troops ...

...It is not without reason that the Black Sea coast is called the 'Russian Riviera'..., 'a Pearl in the Russian crown', how to resist the temptation not to tear off from sick Russia one of her best regions, not to take advantage of the
fact that there is no power as yet to defend this 'region'...121

This sounds so familiar when compared with the invocations of the present Russian national-patriots who again are in need of the 'Russian Riviera'. The tragedy of history is repeating itself.

The independent Georgian Democratic Republic existed for less than three years (from May 1918 to April 1921). Moreover, it may be stated that all her short history was full of a dynamic search for optimal relations with autonomous Abkhazia, based on the people's will and the norms of a democratic constitution. Force was used only in exceptional cases, particularly when an attempt was made to engineer a coup d'etat in Abkhazia during General Denikin's operation (January 1919). Denikin, responding to the appeal of the conspirators to liberate Abkhazia from the Georgian troops, launched an attack on Sukhumi. He presented his arguments to the Georgian government, claiming that Abkhazia belonged to Russia. But in the spring of 1919 the Georgian forces repelled this aggression.

Notwithstanding the wartime tension, immediately after the dissolution of the old composition of the Abkhazian People's Council (which had been in secret negotiations with Denikin), in the autumn of 1918, preparation for the elections to the new Abkhazian People's Council began. And these very elections, carried out on a democratic basis with the participation of the whole population of Abkhazia, resulted in the formation of a new Abkhazian People's Council, a legitimate government body, which at its first sitting on 18-20 March 1919 passed a resolution to the effect that Abkhazia entered into the Georgian Democratic Republic as its autonomous subject. On 20 March 1919 the government of Georgia approved the Act on the autonomy of Abkhazia that had been passed by the People's Council."

It was a bitter irony of fate that the principal proposition on the autonomous government of Abkhazia was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Georgia on one of the last days of her independent existence. The troops of the 11th Red Army, obeying the orders of Trotsky and Ordjonikidze, invaded Georgia and pushed towards Tbilisi. However, the Constituent Assembly - elected through a nationwide ballot - fully performed its civic and historical
duty to the people of the Republic: on 21 February 1921 the principal proposition on Abkhazia's autonomy and the Constitution of the Georgian Democratic Republic were adopted. This is the Constitution of 1921 which the Georgian people have succeeded in restoring only after seven decades. Ideologists of Abkhazian separatism are fond. of asserting that this Constitution did not specify the existence of autonomous Abkhazia. This is a downright lie. The proposition on the autonomy of Abkhazia was adopted by the Constituent Assembly even earlier than the Constitution as a whole, and article 107 of the Constitution clearly announced the right of Abkhazia, as an integral part of Georgia, to have 'autonomous government in local affairs'.

At the close of the winter of 1921, the period of the first democratic revival of Georgian statehood, involving the Abkhazian autonomy, came to its end. On 25 February the Georgian SSR was proclaimed, and on 4 March Soviet power, the Bolshevik dictatorship, was established in Abkhazia. On 6 March notorious Abkhaz revolutionaries - enjoying the special personal favour and confidence of Stalin - arrived from Turkey. They were the so-called Exes, experts in plunder and expropriation, terrorist activity, and in training the Comintern secret service from the foreign diaspora in the Middle East. They formed a Revolutionary Committee (a three-member group consisting of Eshba, chairman, Lakoba and Akirtava). Having established a local Extraordinary Commission (ChK) and Organisation Bureau of the Russian Communist Party of the Bolsheviks (RCP/B) in Abkhazia, they started energetic activity to turn Abkhazia into a Soviet Socialist Republic. On 31 March 1921, the Abkhazian SSR was officially proclaimed. From now on the political history of Abkhazia, as of the whole of Transcaucasia, was directed from the Kremlin. It is noteworthy that the USSR was not yet in existence, neither the Union nor Union Republics, but Ordjonikidze ruled the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee of Russia's Communist Party of Bolsheviks (RCPB), and gave the orders in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moscow took the line of setting up a federation - a union of the Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani SSRs in a Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (proclaimed on 12 March 1922). It entered the political structure of the USSR in December 1922, and existed in such status for fourteen years until the new Stalin Constitution, adopted on 5 December, 1936, determined the fate of Transcaucasia in a different way. Probably at this new stage it seemed to the leader more expedient to rule Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan separately. Thus they were given the status of independent union republics. Abkhazia had to enter the TSFSR and then together with it, through Georgia, the USSR. Delegating her authorities to Georgia, Abkhazia in fact entered the USSR as an autonomous republic, as part of the Georgian SSR. However, the term 'autonomy' in reference to Abkhazia was not used in official documents in the first Soviet decade (1921-1931).

On 16 December 1921 Georgia and Abkhazia signed an appropriate agreement and in February 1922 the first Congress of the Abkhazian Soviets ratified the state union of the Abkhazian and Georgian SSR. The Abkhazian and Georgian Soviet Constitutions, adopted in 1925, also registered this political union. 'The Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia on the basis of a special treaty, enters the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and through her the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic,' states the Constitution of the Abkhazian SSR. However, the status of Abkhazia was often defined in peculiar political jargon: a 'treaty' republic (it is clear though that the term 'treaty' might have been used in reference to Georgia as well). Finally things were made clear when, on 11 February 1931 at the 6th Congress, convened simultaneously by the Georgian and Abkhazian SSR, a resolution was passed on changing the 'treaty' Abkhazian Republic into the Abkhazian autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Georgian SSR. This proposal was confirmed by the Stalin Constitution in 1936.
In reality all of this was of no consequence. For, irrespective of how often definitions were changed or what words were used in constitutions and declarations unanimously adopted by congresses, convened one after another in the country of the Soviets (the word autonomy is, of course, far more attractive than the obscure treaty), all these treaties, autonomies, unions and all the widely announced civil rights they were supposed to enjoy, served merely as a screen concealing an absolute lack of civil rights, a cruel enslavement of personality, ethnos and civil community of the population of any republic, be it Union, federal, or treaty in the general system of the totalitarian regime.

Pilipe Makharadze, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of Georgia, was very accurate and outspoken in characterizing this state of affairs in his speech delivered at the 12th Congress of the Party in 1923: 'They talk', he remarked, 'about independent Soviet republics ... we all understand what kind of independence is meant. You know, we have a single party, one central organ which makes all the decisions for every republic, even the smallest ones; it does absolutely everything, and gives general directives, right up to appointing executives.'

After being changed from a treaty republic into an autonomy, Abkhazia actually neither gained nor lost anything, not a single ko- p ' for her budget, not a single inch of her land (enthusiastically being turned into an All-Union health-resort, mercilessly devastated ecologically, but no longer hers), nor any bit of freedom, for there was no trace of freedom in that country.

After receiving within a few years the Order of Lenin and the Sun of the Stalin Constitution as a gift for the fifteenth anniversary of the Republic, Abkhazia was plunged into the most atrocious, bloody horror of repression. There was a rapid succession of events: the secret murder of Nestor Lakoba, Chairman of the Abkhazian Central Executive Committee, on 16 December 1936; the posthumous announcement of his being an enemy of the people; the merciless elimination of his whole family, including his children and comrades-in-arms, their terrible torture in torture-chambers of the People's Committee of Internal Affairs (NKVD); impetuous countrywide collectivization within a year, from the horror of which Lakoba tried, more or less successfully, to protect the agriculture of Abkhazia till 1936; the complete elimination of the Abkhazian intelligentsia, the most important link ensuring the mutual understanding and reciprocal influence of Georgian and Abkhazian cultures, and the fundamentally prepared
decision on the mass deportation of the Abkhazian people from their native country (by sheer luck it was not fulfilled, though the people of the Northern Caucasus, the Crimea, Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, Khemshils, and Pontic Greeks had to suffer this misfortune).

Against the background of these huge crimes came the programmes to cripple the Abkhazian language, to restrict the sphere of its application, bringing to nought its role in the people's culture and memory. The replacement of Abkhazian writing first with Georgian and then Cyrillic scripts (1937), and the abolition of the Abkhazian language at secondary schools and in the system of preliminary education, with a provocative substitution of Abkhazian lessons by obligatory lessons conducted in Georgian - all this formed part and parcel of the national policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet State.

All the peoples of the USSR found themselves in the orbit of this policy regardless of the status that was conferred on - or arbitrarily taken away from - a republic, region or any other territorial unit; regardless of the borders that were drawn and re-drawn, of the high-flown words about equality, freedom, autonomy, and friendship between the peoples that were solemnly pronounced on different occasions and forgotten at once, and of many other fine things that had nothing to do with reality.

At the same time, the card, deftly played in Abkhazian political history, aimed at a gradual transformation of a republic formed on a treaty basis into an autonomous one, was not a futile exercise, and though these words were devoid of juridical sense, political reality, value and truth, playing with them proved to be surprisingly easy in order to maintain in the public consciousness and psychology the sense of wounded dignity, jealous envy of their neighbours and a host of political myths that, for the communist dictators, facilitated the task of dividing and ruling in a multi-national country. In the Abkhaz social consciousness, a myth was cultivated that Abkhazia - because of the malicious intent of its neighbours, the Georgians - was fraudulently deprived of the status of a sovereign republic and artificially turned into an autonomous republic in 1931.

However, under the totalitarian regime, neither the so-called union republics nor any other autonomous formations possessed any genuine autonomy and the human and ethnic rights of the peoples were equally flagrantly violated on the whole territory of the Soviet Union. Yet the difference between the two administrative formations was appreciable. In the union republics far more favourable conditions were created for the titular nations than in the autonomies which were under double subordination - first to the republic centre, in the present case in Tbilisi, and second, to the All-Union authorities in Moscow. The resentment was even more irritating because of the striking difference between the standard of living of the Georgians in Georgia (including the level of their cultural development) and that of the Abkhazians, who felt oppressed in every respect in their own homeland.

It was not difficult to make the people labouring under a totalitarian regime, whose best intellectual part was almost completely exterminated, who had been driven to despair and who were not well-versed in political science or realpolitik, believe that all their misfortunes resulted from a loss of sovereignty and its replacement with the humiliating status of autonomy.

It goes without saying that for several decades after such a replacement many concrete steps were taken that infringed upon the national rights and offended the national dignity of the Abkhazians, whom Communist power skilfully set against the neighbouring peoples, first and foremost against the Georgian people. Further carrying on the tsarist policy of ousting the Abkhazians from their historical homeland, the Soviet Government continued this policy by the hands of the Georgians. It gave the Georgian settlers in the western and eastern regions of the republic the most fertile lands, allotted to them plots for country-cottages, houses and flats (in conditions of an overall housing shortage in the resort zone); it opened the doors of prestigious higher education institutions to Georgians (in conditions when the demands of the youth of Abkhazia were not satisfied); it appointed Georgians to lucrative posts and jobs (in conditions of latent unemployment and overall poverty); finally, it granted to Georgians the leading posts in the Party and government structures. Having long since turned into a national minority within the boundaries of Abkhazia, and despite their natural population growth, every year the Abkhazian people found themselves increasingly surrounded by other nationals, primarily Georgians, and the number of Abkhazians began to decrease steadily. Divide and rule, the tactics of the Communist leadership, are plain to see.

The leading posts in Sukhumi, especially from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s were occupied not even by local Georgians but by people from other regions who were not familiar with the situation in Abkhazia and indifferent to all the problems of the Abkhazians.

Both the exploitation of the resort zone and the denigration of Abkhaz culture naturally stirred up a feeling of bitterness among the Abkhazian people, summed up recently by Aslanbey Gozhba: 'We live in Abkhazia, but we do not possess it.'
All this happened here in the same way as in the national outlying districts of the Soviet empire, from Lithuania to the Far East. At this time causes for resentment were not all invented by some nationalist-extremists but had real substance; they accumulated through several decades, turning into an explosive mixture of suppressed resentment, popular anger and civil protest. With the collapse of the totalitarian regime, much depended on how and by whom that destructive force would be directed.

It should be said that attempts to direct rising popular resentment and impatience along a safe channel had been made a long time before. To what extent and by whom these attempts were organised, how much came from a spontaneous, sincere impulse or naive hope ('We shall leave Georgia and it will make our life easier'), and how much was based upon a subtly calculated provocation which gave those concerned a chance to search for and punish culprits after each political déj à vu, are questions that call for a thorough historical analysis in each case.

Without going too deeply into the matter, I simply remind the reader that as far back as 1931, a stormy meeting of many days (18-26 April) - the so-called national rally of the Abkhazians - in the village of Duripsh voiced the people's protest against the transformation of the Abkhazian Republic into an autonomous one. The fate of many orators who had dared to give vent to their sentiments and emotions at that meeting was really deplorable.

 Later, after Stalin's death, the Abkhazian question cropped up with a surprising regularity every ten years, and perhaps this helps provoke the teasing thought that advanced planning and organisation were at work. It may have been thought a good idea to let off some steam after each decade, allowing the Abkhaz anti-autonomists to make one more declaration concerning the unjust inclusion of the Abkhazian SSR within the Georgian SSR. Perhaps from time to time an object lesson and a pretext were needed for a new campaign against nationalism (both Georgian and Abkhazian) and to 'strengthen the ideological work towards an international education of the working masses'. Nationalistic passions were so much aroused that heartfelt collective letters were written and sent to various official departments: to the regular Congress of the CPSU, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, or personally to Comrade Khruschev, Comrade Brezhnev, and so on. Anyhow in 1957, 1967, 1978 and finally in 1988 (when the notorious Abkhaz letter that became the detonator of the first tragic events of 1989 was written) the Abkhazian question recurred.

Any changes in the highest echelons of power and any change in the home policy served as a stimulus for raising this question anew. As is seen in the chronological chain of events, the Abkhazian question was discussed shortly after the 20th Congress of the CPSU, then after the removal of Nikita Khruschev, later in connection with the adoption of the new Constitution of the USSR, and naturally at the time when perestroika was in full swing. Collective letters, individual public speeches, small-scale meetings (it had not come to larger-scale demonstrations yet) were promoted by narrow circles of functionaries directly interested in raising their republican status, who managed to inspire not only the youth but the romantically disposed Abkhaz intelligentsia with this idea. The main body of the population of the republic, the so-called 'working mass', did not take part in these political games. These speeches did not produce any radical changes, as the state system of the USSR remained indestructible for the time being; but these actions did leave some traces.

Permanent tension in Abkhaz-Georgian relations was maintained: and it is not difficult to understand in whose long-term interests this was done. A not so subtle blackmail of the Georgian leadership was resorted to at a high level: 'If you don't behave yourself we shall punish you by cutting off Abkhazia from Georgia'. This was usually followed by the exposure of some suspicious trouble-making nationalists among the Abkhazians. (Those who signed petitions in the Soviet tradition were always among those who suffered.) Then came 'filtration' of the 'unreliable elements' throughout the whole republic. Every act of shake-up and reshuffle, every resolution of the regional committee or the Central Committee of the Georgian CP, following yet another attempt at revising the status of the autonomy, promised pragmatic advantages to all those who stood behind the scenes.

Meanwhile the situation in Abkhazia changed and in those changes there were certain things that inspired hope, and certain other things that caused anxiety. The Abkhazia of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and especially of the 1980s no longer looked like the Abkhazia of 1936-1938 or 1944-1949 - the humiliated, mute country, crushed by terror and deprived of its national intelligentsia and of its native language. Sukhumi State University became the engine of lively scientific ideas; the scientific-research institutes of the republic gave birth to some important schools engaged in technical and humanitarian studies and in the unions of writers, artists, journalists and architects, the Abkhaz creative intelligentsia was worthily represented.

I would not like to lapse into the tone of an official festive report or a prospectus on Soviet Abkhazia, but the above, after all, did correspond to reality: the Abkhazian Theatre with a rich repertory in Sukhumi, some talented amateur art groups, the Days of Abkhazian Culture in Georgia (10-13 April 1980), the national press, independent television and broadcasting not controlled by Moscow or Tbilisi, four magazines issued in the Autonomous Republic, the largest number of books per head in their mother tongue. It has been calculated that in terms of titles (4.3 book
editions per 10,000 people) Abkhazia ranked first in the USSR (Estonian and Latvian book-publishing offices excelled. this figure by the circulation index, and not by titles). In the 1980s both the Abkhazian language and the history of Abkhazia were taught at the schools of Abkhazia.

At the same time the situation in Abkhazia changed for the worse. If in Stalin's time advantages and privileges were artificially conferred on the Georgians, after 1956 the situation went to another extreme and now the ethnic Abkhazians began to supplant the Georgians, the Russians and representatives of other nationalities and to form a ruling and representative elite on the basis of family, clan and blood ties. In search of ways to satisfy the career ambitions of some Abkhazians, the nationalist argument was very frequently put forward.

At one of the last plenary sessions of the CPSU Central Committee (in September 1989), the first secretary of the CP of Georgia, G. Gumbaridze, emphatically announced: 'The fact that at present in multi-national Abkhazia, where the Abkhazians constitute only 17% of her total population, the national Abkhaz cadres hold 40% of places in the local elective bodies and more than half of the leading political and executive posts, speaks for itself'.

At the Abkhazian D. Gulia Institute of Language, Literature and History, which (especially after Ardzinba's appointment as its director in 1988) became the hotbed of theories of 'Abkhazia for the Abkhazians', 'Abkhazia is not Georgia', and the ideological headquarters of Abkhaz separatism, 75% of its scientific personnel are Abkhaz nationals.

The dismissal of Georgian specialists from many offices and especially from leading posts had become almost a norm in the political life of Abkhazia by the end of the 1980s. For example, the activists of the Abkhaz national movement unleashed a baiting campaign, demanding the resignation of the secretaries of the regional Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia in Gagra (including T. Nadareishvili) only because of their nationality.

Without closing our eyes to these very real contradictions, we can draw the following conclusion from the review and analysis of the ethnopolitical situation in Abkhazia towards the end of the 1980s. There was not a single problem that could not have been solved without resorting to military force. There were no objective reasons for the collision of the two peoples in an armed conflict and a civil war. There was no great warp in the state system of Georgia or in the autonomy of Abkhazia that must necessarily be corrected by a radical severing of the historically established geopolitical and ethnopolitical ties in this region.

At the same time the situation was complex. There was real social tension: links between the Autonomous Republic, the Union Republic, and the Centre, were far from ideal. There was no real political culture in the country; the ethnopolitical factors and the scars which still lived in the people's memory, all created favourable ground for the seeds of conflict. The only thing needed was the emergence of forces interested in such a conflict to turn potential problems into out-and-out war.