

**AJARLAN IDENTITY AND THE REGIME OF
ASLAN ABASHIDZE**

A Master's Thesis

by

DAVID BRODY

Department of
International Relations
Ankara
September 1999

THESIS
DK
511
A315
.B76
1999

For Zehra

AJARIAN IDENTITY AND THE REGIME OF ASLAN ABASHIDZE

**The Institute of Economics and Social Sciences
of
Bilkent University**

by

DAVID BRODY

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

in

**THE DEPARTMENT OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
BILKENT UNIVERSITY
ANKARA**

September 1999

Thesis

DK

511

.A315

B76

1999

B 049297

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of International Relations.



Assistant Professor Hakan Kırımlı,
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of International Relations.



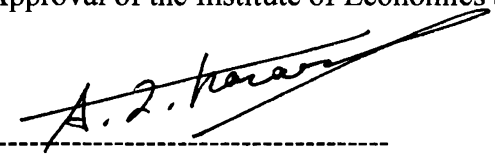
Assistant Professor Gülgün Tuna
Examining Committee Member

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of International Relations.



Assistant Professor Hasan Ünal
Examining Committee Member

Approval of the Institute of Economics and Social Sciences



Professor Ali Karaosmanoğlu
Director

ABSTRACT

AJARIAN IDENTITY AND THE REGIME OF ASLAN ABASHIDZE

Brody, David

M. I. R., Department of International Relations

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Dr. Hakan Kırımlı

September 1999

This thesis analyzes the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria: the Ajarian people, their history, and the nature of the current administration under Aslan Abashidze. Emphasis is given to a historical consideration of the self identity of the Ajarians, within the wider context of Georgian nationalism and national identity.

The phenomenon of Aslan Abashidze's rule is treated at length, with special attention given to the relationship of the Abashidze regime with Russian border troops stationed within the republic. Abashidze's relations with the central government in Tbilisi, and with Turkey are also examined.

Keywords: Ajaria, Georgia, Caucasus, Turkey, Black Sea, Nationalism, National Identity

ÖZET

ACAR KİMLİĞİ VE ACARİSTANDA ASLAN ABAŞİDZE YÖNETİMİ

Brody, David

Master, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü

Tez Yöneticisi: Yrd. Doç. Dr. Hakan Kırımlı

Eylül 1999

Bu tez, Acaristan Özerk Cumhuriyetini, Acar halkını, Acar tarihini ve Aslan Abaşıdze yönetimi altındaki bugünkü rejimlerinin karakterini analiz etmektedir. Burada özellikle, Gürcü milliyetçiliği ve milli kimliği ile ilişkili olarak Acarların kimliği ve geçmişi üzerinde durulmaktadır.

Abaşıdze olayı, uzun uzadıya işlenmiş, Özerk Cumhuriyet içinde yer alan Rus sınır birliklerinin Abaşıdze rejimi ile olan ilişkisi üzerinde özellikle durulmuştur. Abaşıdze'nin Tiflis'deki ana hükümet ve Türkiye ile olan ilişkileri de dikkatle incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Acaristan, Gürcistan, Kafkasya, Türkiye, Karadeniz, Milliyetçilik, Milli Kimlik.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the staff of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) for the help and hospitality they showed me during my stay in Tbilisi. Their initial guidance and contacts proved invaluable. Assoc. Prof. Ibrahim Yıldırım shared both his knowledge and rare books with me, neither of which I could have done without. Asude Gündoğdu's interviews with Ajarians in Turkey demonstrate that undergraduate assignments need not be regarded merely as practice for future academic work, but that sometimes they can be real contributions in themselves. I am grateful that she made them available to me. The staff of the Ajaria News Agency provided me with many documents and publications that proved useful in preparing this work. Whit Mason, as always, helped me to clarify my ideas, providing feedback as I thought out loud. Lastly, I would like to thank Asst. Prof. Hakan Kırımlı for his teaching and guidance over the last two and a half years, and my wife Zehra for her love and understanding.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: A Brief History Of Ajaria	
A Sketch of Ancient Histories.....	6
David and Tamar.....	9
Dissolution and Ottoman Conquest.....	11
The Long, Violent Ninteenth Century: From the <i>Derebeys</i> to the Tsar.....	15
Tsarist Ajaria.....	21
War, Revolution, and Georgian Independence.....	28
Soviet Ajaria: The Early Period.....	37
Collectivization: The Early Stalin Period.....	39
Beria and the High Stalinist System.....	41
The Post-Stalin Era.....	48
CHAPTER II: Aslan Abashidze: The Modern <i>Derebey</i> .	
Introduction.....	50
Aslan Abashidze's use of Religion in Political Discourse.....	52
Background - Christianity, Islam, and Georgian National Identity.....	57
Memed Abashidze and the Reunification of Ajaria with the Georgian "Motherland".....	60
Clan Abashidze.....	64
Ajaria vs. Tbilisi -The Russian Border Troops Issue.....	66
Javakheti - Parallels and Contrasts.....	77
Abashidze vs. the Center.....	78
The relationship between Shevardnadze and Abashidze.....	80

The “Free Economic Zone”	82
Plots and Intrigue.....	83
CHAPTER III: Ajarian Identity	
Introduction.....	85
Ajarian Identity: The Georgian Context.....	87
The Georgian Conception of Ajarian Identity.....	93
Turkish Ajarian Views of Ajarian Identity – Theses of Turkish Ancestry.....	97
An Alternative Turkish Ajarian View – <i>Çveneburi</i>	100
Analysis.....	104
“Ajarian” Identity.....	106
CONCLUSIONS AND PROGNOSES	
Aslan Abashidze.....	110
Prognosis for regime change in Ajaria.....	111
Prognoses for Stability after Shevardnadze and Abashidze.....	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	116

INTRODUCTION

Besides being intrinsically interesting as one of the least investigated corners of the Caucasus, Ajaria is important for those interested in the fate of the former Soviet Union, because of the unusual stability that has been achieved there. This stability comes despite an inherently unstable political situation: the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria enjoys far more autonomy under its leader Aslan Abashidze than central authorities in Tbilisi would like it to have. Ajaria is not a state, yet it is clearly more than a Georgian province. This region on Turkey's Black Sea border has for the past eight years been for all (or most) practical matters, independent of Georgia. Protected by Russian troops, the government of Ajaria has gone its own way; the writ of Tbilisi ends at the border between Guria and Ajaria, not the international border with Turkey. Indeed, the relationship between this Autonomous Republic and the Georgian Government resembles that of a tribute paying vassal of an empire which can no longer effectively enforce subservience: the relationship between Egypt and the Sublime Porte in the nineteenth century is perhaps a good example of a similar relationship from an earlier era.

Stability seems to be less academically interesting than instability, or so one would have to conclude, comparing the relative avalanche of articles about Chechnya, Abkhazia, Karabakh, etc., to the tiny number written about Ajaria. If, however, we accept that in most instances of conflict, war, and anarchy, the seeds of instability could have been discerned in the previous stable situation, then a compelling motivation for investigating Ajaria and its regime emerges - especially given Ajaria's strategic location, and the inevitability that civil strife

in Ajaria, or conflict between Ajaria and the central government, is absolutely certain to complicate the emerging strategic and economic relationship between Turkey and Georgia, and to further complicate the relationship between Georgia and Russia.

Therefore, this work will have two distinct foci: one on the history and the identity of Ajaria and its people, because this area, on the frontier between Orthodox and Islamic civilizations for a millenium, is historically and culturally unique. The other is on the regime of Aslan Abashidze and what effect it may have on relations between Turkey, Russia, and the rest of Georgia.

Of course, history and politics are interrelated, especially on old battlegrounds like the Caucasus and the Balkans, though the importance of historical factors in explaining modern political allegiances varies from cases to case, and can sometimes be overstated by those of a historical bent. Politicians also vary widely in the extent to which they manipulate cultural and historical differences for their own benefit. Clearly, politicians in each society use and manipulate history, traditional group affiliation and prejudices for their own ends, but the real explanation for the power of most leaders often lies in more practical matters.

This thesis, then, is about the history and culture of Ajaria, the way these have shaped, and more recently been shaped by the regime of Aslan Abashidze, and what we have to learn, or fear, from Ajaria today. The investigation will be in

three parts. The first chapter will consist of a historical overview of Ajaria and an investigation of the “identity” of its people at different points in its history. The second chapter will examine the situation in present-day Ajaria and the phenomenon of its leader Aslan Abashidze. The importance of Abashidze in the history of Ajaria is hard to overstate, as the phenomenon of Ajaria’s de-facto independence and even its continuing existence as an autonomous region within Georgia are to a great extent due to his balancing act between Moscow, Tbilisi, and Ankara. The third chapter is an analysis of the self-identity of the Ajarians, as well as the way they have historically been seen by Christian Georgia. The study of identity has been carried out in order to address one of the main issues of controversy connected to the history of the region and its people, which is: who do the Ajarians of Georgia believe they are: Muslim Georgians, Georgian-speaking Turks, or a nation unto themselves?

In the conclusion, these three chapters, which are in many ways separate investigations, will be tied together, relating the history of Ajaria and the identity of the Ajarians to the phenomenon of Aslan Abashidze and his rule. The implicit assumption in the design of this study is that the history of a nation, a region, or an ethnic group can to a large extent shed light upon its present circumstances. While it is necessary to understand the history of Ajaria and who the Ajarians are in order to understand the contemporary politics of the region, this study is not an attempt to reduce politics to history. On the contrary, while historical background is necessary, events in modern Ajaria can only be understood by combining historical background with an understanding of such factors as clan ties, the role of the Russian military, Abashidze’s

political program and record of governance, his personality and the context of the Georgian political scene.

The methodology of this work was determined by necessity. There is no serious historical work focusing specifically on Ajaria or neighboring regions between Turkey and Georgia in English, and no adequate study has ever been carried out in any language, except perhaps for Georgian.¹ Most histories of Georgia treat the region only in passing, and all of them exclude the more than 300 years when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire. The history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Ajaria is better documented, but only as military history, as the region was on the frontline between the Russian and Ottoman empires before both entities collapsed due to the strains of the First World War. After the region was divided between Turkey and Soviet Georgia following the war, it again slipped back into historical insignificance and is mentioned infrequently by scholars of Georgia and Turkey alike.

The methodology for the analysis of modern Ajaria has also been dictated by necessity and scarcity of materials, as there has not yet been a serious full length academic article published about Aslan Abashidze's regime, though at the time of this writing there are at least two in French which are pending, and which should be published soon². Most of the materials available on the

¹ It is likely that all of the works published in Georgian on the subject would be found wanting by non-Georgian audiences. There is supposedly a five-volume set history in the works, though this is to be published in Batumi, which means that it will likely be heavily biased towards the history of the Abashidze family, as are the other "historical" works which have appeared in Batumi in the last few years.

² One of these is based on the article cited below (in Russian) by David Darchiashvili, who was kind enough to give me an early version. According to the author, the final French article will be changed in many respects. The articles by Liz Fuller in RFE/RL Research Reports should also be mentioned. See for example "Aslan Abashidze: Georgia's Next Leader" *RFE/RL*

subject are newspaper articles, and other journalistic sources. Other sources include materials produced by the official “Ajaria” newsagency, including election materials and information for would-be investors, and personal conversations with diplomats, academics, and chance acquaintances in Georgia.

Research Reports (5 November, 1993) pp.23 – 26. Though these are now out of date, Ms. Fuller maintains her interest in Ajaria, and this is reflected by a rather large number of articles on the republic and its leaders appearing in *RFE/RL Caucasus Report* up to the present time.

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AJARIA

A Sketch of Ancient Histories

According to David Marshall Lang: “It is during the years immediately following the fall of the Hittite empire that the historical records of Assyria begin to provide concrete data about the rulers and tribes who can be identified with some confidence as forerunners of the Georgians.”¹ Thus this period makes a convenient starting point for this brief sketch of Ajarian history. Ajarian history is of necessity also Georgian history, of course, but it is outside the scope of this work to give a general history of the Georgian historical region. Also, even though there are important ancient kingdoms which encompassed the land now known as Ajaria, it is not helpful to delve into these histories for two reasons: first, because the history of Colchis and its predecessors and immediate successors has been investigated in length – far more than the history of the region in more modern times, and second: because the ancient kingdoms of Georgia are too remote in time and culture to tell us much about the country in more modern times.

Roughly around the first millennium BC, a branch of a Black Sea tribe known as Mushki, having been defeated and dispersed by Assyrian arms, sought refuge in Transcaucasia. This tribe settled in southwestern Georgia, “to form the nucleus of the prominent Georgian tribe of the Meskhians (the Moskhoi of the

¹ David Marshall Lang, *The Georgians* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 54.

Greek geographers), whose province, Samtskhe, retains its distinctive identity up to the present day.”²

“Another important ethnic element on the borders of Anatolia and Caucasia was the confederation of the Daiaeni (Daiani) of the Assyrian Sources, known to the Urartians as Diauehi (Diauhi), and as Taokhoi to the Greeks.”³ These people lent their name to the region around Olti, which the Georgians still call Tao, and which lies within Turkey today.

Somewhat further to the north and along the coast, the fabled kingdom of Colchis came into being at roughly this time, on the lands which would later become the provinces of Ajaria, Guria, Mingrelia and Imeretia. Colchis, known to the west through Greek sources as the land of the Golden Fleece, deserves to be treated as a subject in its own right, which it has been, and thus it will not be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that the region known as Ajaria today was a part of it, and that it was here in Colchis, at Greek port settlements like Bathys, Trapezus, and Dioscurias, the modern Batumi, Trabzon, and Sukhumi, respectively, that Western civilization first entered Georgia, and Georgia became an outpost of Hellenic, and later, Roman civilization.

This association was to be of seminal importance for Georgia, for in the fourth century, in the waning years of the Roman Empire, the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia was converted to Christianity. This event, which occurred about 330AD, soon after the official conversion of the Armenians, endowed the

² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³ *Ibid.*, p.57.

Georgians with what has remained a central pillar of their culture and identity.⁴ Even after direct connection with the Christian west was severed by the Turkish conquest of Anatolia, and Persian replaced Greek and Roman political culture, Christianity separated the Georgians and the Armenians from their immediate neighbors, and made them feel a part of a different brotherhood - a distant one until the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus in the nineteenth century.

Christian rule in Georgia was not uninterrupted. In the middle of the seventh century, the Arabs conquered Armenia. Seeing this, the Georgians submitted voluntarily to superior force, and had to accept an Arab *amir* in Tbilisi, who ruled Kartli and eastern Georgia for the caliph.⁵ It was at this time that Georgians from the east began to leave, fleeing Arab rule, which was unpopular despite being in many respects enlightened. These colonists settled in Ajaria and Guria, and it is due to their influence that the dialects of these two western Georgian provinces resemble standard Georgian, rather than Laz and Mingrelian. It was also due to this incursion by the easterners that the western language zone was split, which fostered the development of Laz and Mingrelian as different languages, or at least very distinct dialects.⁶ It was not, as one might imagine, simply a result of the conversion to Islam of the Laz.

⁴ It should be noted that the western Georgian successor to Colchis, known as Lazica, which asserted its independence as Roman power declined, was not officially converted to Christianity until the sixth century, though Christian missionaries had been active there for hundreds of years by that time.

⁵ Lang, p. 103. *Amir* remained a title of office in the courts of medieval Christian Georgia. The term *vaziri* was also used, to denote the rank of minister. In 1212, Queen Tamara created the office of *atabagi*, who became one of the five (previously four) *vazirni*. W. E. D. Allen, , *A History of the Georgian People* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., 1932)p. 260.

⁶ Lang, p. 77.

David and Tamar

During most of the eleventh century, Georgia was devastated by a series of invasions by the Selcuk Turks. Under Alp-Arslan and his successor Malik Shah, whole sections of the Georgian countryside were depopulated. Among the regions most devastated were Ajaria and Samtze.⁷ “On one and the same day, the all-destroying bands of plundering cavalry burnt Kutais the capital, the noble town of Ardanuchi, and the ancient monasteries along the Chorokhi.”⁸ Thus, these previously rich lands were emptied, and became grazing grounds for the nomadic Turks.

Soon after the depredations of Alp-Arslan, the Selcuks found themselves under attack from the west, as the Crusaders landed in Palestine and Syria and wrested lands there from Muslim control. In the lull provided by the Christian invasions, the Georgian monarchy was able to regenerate, and it was fortunate that a capable warrior, as well as an able ruler, came to the throne at this critical juncture. King David II, known as *Agmashenebeli* “The Restorer” or “The Rebuilder” began, at the close of the eleventh century, to reassert royal control over those principalities of Georgia not under Turkish control. He then turned his attention to regaining those territories, primarily in south and southwestern Georgia, which had been taken over by Turkish nomads. “David, therefore, undertook a long and continuous series of operations lasting from 1110 to 1122 with the object of clearing the nomads from the reaches of the

⁷ Allen, pp. 87 – 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

middle Mtkvari, and as he make progress in the southeast he also extended his operations to the depopulated districts round the Meskian lakes”⁹

After driving these Muslim Turkish nomads out of what had been Georgian lands, David, in order to secure his rule against his vassals and to prepare for further conquests, began to build a mercenary army of non-Georgians. For this he enlisted the aid of the Ossetian and Kipchak tribes to his north:

David’s ambitions were growing also with his fortunes, and he now began seriously to recruit a mercenary standing army from among the Ossetians and Kipchaks. His connection with the Kipchaks was close, for his wife was a Kipchak princess, and David deliberately consolidated this connection by the construction of fortresses in the Daryal, which gave him direct and continued access to his allies in the north. About 1118, he formed a special guard of 5, 000 Kipchak slaves, all converts to Christianity, and he introduced by the Daryal Pass a multitude of Kipchak families whom he settled in the depopulated districts of Georgia and Armenia, which had recently been reconquered. The Kipchak settlers are stated by the Annalist to have been able to provide him with 40, 000 trained warriors...¹⁰

These Kipchak warriors, along with other mercenary troops, would be decisive in defeating a much larger Seljuk army at the battle of Didigori in 1121, which lead to the fall of Tbilisi the following year.

It is certainly quite likely that the current residents of the region around Artvin and Ardanuch, as well as those peoples deported from Meskheta by Stalin in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99. The figure 40,000 is from the Georgian annals. The same figure is given by David Marshal Lang in *The Georgians* (p. 111), and by Alexandre Manvelichvili in *Histoire de Géorgie* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions de la Toison d’Or, 1951), p. 167. The largest of these settlement areas appears to have been around the middle reaches of the Mtkvari (Kura) river (Allen, p. 107).

1944, are in part descended from these same warriors who helped resettle those areas of the Georgian kingdom that had been ravaged by war with the Selcuks.

Dissolution and Ottoman Conquest

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Georgia was coming to the end of a period of cultural greatness and political strength that it has yet to equal. While its Golden Age had ended with Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century, Georgia had rallied in the fourteenth century, throwing off the weakening rule of the Ilkhanids and reaching the end of the century in unity. The beginning of the next century, however, saw renewed fighting with the Mongols, weakening the monarchy and the country. The last king of a united Georgia was Alexander I.¹¹ When he died in 1442, the country was riven by squabbles between local princes: while a measure of recovery would come in the middle of the seventeenth century, Georgia was already firmly on a path towards dissolution.

The breakup of the unitary Georgian kingdom immediately concerns the history of Ajaria and of its current dynastic family, the Abashidzes. From the death of Alexander's first son Vakhtang IV in 1446, Georgia was ruled by his youngest son Georgi VIII. The nobles of Imereti refused to accept his rule and eventually rose up against him. Bagrat, the *eristavi* of Imereti, led a coalition composed of Quarqware II, *atabeg* of Samtzkhe (Saatabago – “land of the *atabegs*”); Kakhberi Wardanidze, *eristavi* of Guria; Lipariti Dadiani of Mingrelia; Sharvashidze of Abkhazeti and Jiketi; and Gelovani, *eristavi* of

¹¹ Ronald Grigor Suny *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 45.

Svaneti.¹² The rebels, with the exception of the *atabeg*, met and defeated the king at Chikhori in 1462. The victorious nobles crowned Bagrat King of Imereti: he in turn relieved them of all duties to him save military aid and the acceptance of a formal suzerainty. Imereti was divided into four *mtavarates*¹³ ruled by the four families, which were independent in all but name.¹⁴ Thus did the dissolution of Georgia in the fifteenth century begin.

The following year, a somewhat weakened Quarqware II ceded Ajaria to Kahkhaber Wardanidze, ruler of Guria. To this small event in Georgian history Aslan Abashidze traces the history of his family's rule in Ajaria. An informational brochure published by the official *Ajaria* news agency links Aslan to Kahkhaber, and shows the family coat of arms on which was written: "Abashidze Eristhavi Gurieli."¹⁵

The period during which the Gurielis were able to enjoy their de-facto independence was short-lived. While the petty princes and *begs* of Georgia were carving up the kingdom amongst themselves, the Ottomans in Anatolia and the Safavids in Persia were becoming ever more menacing. Georgia had been menaced by Turkish and Persian armies before, but during the Middle Ages the united kingdom had been strong enough to drive off all aggressors

¹² Allen, p. 137.

¹³ *Mtavari* and *eristavi* were both Georgian titles of nobility. Though the former seems to have been higher than the latter, both *mtavari* and *eristavi* were found as governors of provinces. Allen, p. 238 – 240.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁵ "Georgia: Adjarian Autonomous Republic" An unpublished PR pamphlet produced in Batumi by the Ajaria News Agency, 1998, p. 11. Interestingly, there is a discrepancy between Allen, who claims that Kahkhaber's family name was Wardanidze, and this brochure, which names him Kahkhaber Abashidze. The Wardanidze name is used in a semi-official biography of Memed Abashidze, (*Sin Otechestva – The Patriot*, by Temuraz Komakhidze, Batumi, 1994. In Georgian and Russian with an English summary).

save the aforementioned Mongols and Timur. There are more than enough examples in history of this tragic luck – which appears like fate to even the most rational observer – of disunity and weak leadership occurring at a vital historical juncture. Perhaps it could be said more rationally, that Georgia's location at the intersection of the huge Turkish, Persian, (and later) Russian empires meant that the inevitable lapses of sound governance could only lead to disaster. Which is what happened, slowly, over the next four centuries.

In the early years of the sixteenth century, the *atabegs* of Samtzkhe regained control of Ajaria.¹⁶ But in 1535, Bagrat III of Imereti, then allied with the Safavid Shah Tahmasp, marched into Samtzkhe and defeated Qwarqware IV, whose family had aligned with the Ottomans. He again divested the *atabegs* of Ajaria and Chaneti (or “Lazistan”) and bestowed them again upon the Gurieli.¹⁷ He may have done this in order to incite the jealousy of Levan Dadiani of Mingrelia, and to make him, the most prominent of his *mtavars*, feel that his position was threatened. This shortsighted scheme worked. When a Turkish army of 22, 000 attacked Samtzkhe in 1543, the prince of Guria rallied to his king, but the prince of Mingrelia did not.¹⁸

Despite this lack of unity, the Georgians were at first successful. A battle at Karagaki (near Erzerum) ended in the total defeat of the Turks. But a disunited and outnumbered Georgian force was no match for the much larger army sent in 1545. The issue was decided when some Meskhian detachments

¹⁶ Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont and Chahryar Adle, *Les Ottomans, Les Safavides et la Georgie: 1514-1524*. (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1991)P. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Allen, p. 145.

¹⁸ Kalistrat Salia, *Histoire de la Nation Géorgienne* (Paris: Nino Salia, 1980), p. 290.

deserted in the heat of the battle. This defeat allowed the Turks to plant themselves firmly in Samtzkhe.¹⁹

The Gurieli's problems were not over, however. In 1552, during the last great contest between the Ottoman Emperor Suleiman and the Persian emperor, the Turks took Batumi.. In the same year, they advanced as far as Ardanuc inland, taking this territory from the heart of Samtzkhe. Two years before, they had taken Tao from the *atabegs*.²⁰ By the time that the Ottomans and the Safavids concluded peace in 1555, a substantial part of Georgia had been conquered outright by the two empires. Much of Samtzkhe and Chaneti were permanently lost to Georgia; these regions lie within modern Turkey today. Additionally, Georgia was officially divided into Persian and Ottoman spheres of influence, with all of western Georgia, including Ajaria and Guria, and the western parts of Samtzkhe coming officially under Turkish rule. While this treaty theoretically marks the beginning of Ottoman rule in Ajaria, it was in fact to be several more decades until they could really establish their rule there.²¹

According to one source, the Abashidzes did not wait that long to place a foot in the Ottoman camp. One of Kakhaber's sons, Georgi, converted to Islam and was recognized as the *Sancak Beyi* of Lazistan and Ajaria. This would have been soon after the turn of the sixteenth century, while Selim I was ruling in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²⁰ Allen, p.148. K. Salia has the Ottomans, under the Pasha of Erzurum, in Ardanuc a year earlier. See *Histoire de la Nation Géorgienne*. p. 277.

²¹ Salia, p. 293.

Istanbul. Other members of the Abashidze family remained in Imeretia where the Abashidzes would continue to be an important noble family.²²

As the Ottomans consolidated their rule, the *millet* system was brought to the newly conquered territories. While this system afforded non-Muslims a degree of freedom which was quite substantial when compared to the way in which Europeans treated their religious minorities, there were still very real advantages to being Muslim. As owning land was a privilege of those who served in the army, and army service was restricted to Muslims, many members of the ruling classes converted to Islam, as did landed peasants. A majority of the kartvelian speaking peoples of Lazistan, Ajaria, and Samtzkhe converted to Islam during the seventeenth century.

The Long, Violent Nineteenth Century: From the *Derebeys* to the Tsar:

Ajaria and eastern Lazistan, went easily from being a Georgian rural backwater to become a forgotten corner of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike parts of the Balkans conquered at about the same time, the eastern Pontus and mountainous Ajaria received very little Ottoman settlement.²³

The eighteenth century was a period of decline in the Ottoman Empire as a whole. The state grew steadily less powerful, and the provinces were more and more under the rule of local lords who were hardly accountable to Constantinople. These *derebeys* or “valley lords” reached the peak of their

²² Komakhidze, p. 102.

²³ Anthony Bryer, “The Last Laz Risings and the Downfall of the Pontic Derebeys.” *Bedi Kartlisa* (1969) vol. XXVI, p. 191.

power and independence during the eighteenth century. Some could field private armies more powerful than those available to the Sultan. In Ajaria and the eastern Pontus, which had never been fully integrated into the Ottoman state, this process was especially far reaching, and the *derebeys* of this region were among the last to be subdued when the Center began reassert its power in the nineteenth century.

Of the families that held power in this area at the time, almost none appear to have held that power since the Ottoman conquest. Along with imperial decline, the process of fragmentation, already advanced when the area was part of Georgia, continued apace. If, in the late fifteenth century, the rulers of Guria had ruled a substantial part of Tao, Ajaria and Lazistan, by the late eighteenth century the land was in the hands of dozens of petty noble families, most of whose “nobility” could be traced back only a few decades.²⁴

At the time, upland Ajaria was ruled by the powerful Himshiashvili (Hamşioğlu) family. In the 1828 – 1829 Russo -Turkish war, the forces put into the field by Ahmet Bey Himshiashvili were the most formidable Turkish forces in the Caucasian theater.²⁵ Indeed, the most difficult fighting faced by the advancing Russian troops in 1829 was against the Ajarian irregulars around

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192, n. 1. According to Bryer, none of the *timar* holding families of the c. 1520 cadaster appeared to survive in the province of Trabzon in the nineteenth century, though he reports that Michael Meeker had come across certain surnames there during his research in the 1960's, which might be derived from names of that vintage.

²⁵ W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 23. Both recent and Soviet Georgian historical accounts downplay or ignore the role that the Laz and Ajarians played for Turkey in the wars of the nineteenth century. On the contrary: they are often portrayed as wars of liberation. See for example A. S. Bendianishvili, “Rusko-Turetzkaya Voina 1877 – 1878 I. Gruzia,” *Ocherki Istorii Gruzii* (Tbilisi: Metzniyereba, 1990), Vol. 5, p. 330. Also, Komakhidze, p. 99., and *Adjaria*, (Moscow: Planeta Press, 1986), pp. 40 – 41.

Akhaltzikhe and against the Laz in the Çoruh valley.²⁶ The war resulted in defeat for Turkey and pushed the frontier of the Russian Empire up to the border of Ajaria.

Due to the harsh rule imposed on them in the 1830's and 1840's, some foreign observers worried that the Laz and Ajarians might be tempted to revolt on behalf of the Russians, who were moving from strength to strength in the southern Caucasus. In the period following the war of 1828 – 1829, Sultan Mahmud II attempted to break the power of the great independent *derebeys* of Lazistan, and to some extent, Ajaria as well. In the event, the Laz *derebeys*, led by Tahir Ağa Tuzcuoğlu of Rize, did rise in revolt in 1832. Among those who rallied to his standard was his brother-in-law, one Aslan Bey of Batumi.

The revolt was initially successful: at its height in January 1833, it appeared that the rebels would besiege and probably take Trabzon. The situation was defused, however, when Tahir Tuzcuoğlu was appointed governor of Rize, thus giving official sanction to the de facto situation. But in July 1833, the revolt resumed, this time with a hint of Russian intrigue. It appeared that Aslan Bey of Batumi, under the alias “Major Voinikov”, was encouraging the rebels on behalf of the Russians. Osman Hazinedaroğlu, the governor of Trabzon and himself an Ajarian, set out on a new campaign to destroy Aslan Bey.²⁷

By the spring of 1834, the rising had been put down. Tahir Tuzcuoğlu's head was sent to Constantinople, and Aslan Bey fled to Russian Georgia. The

²⁶ Allen, p. 44.

²⁷ Bryer, p. 202.

suppression of the rising had finally broken the power of the Laz *derebeys*, though those in Ajaria would remain independent for a short while longer.²⁸ There were also a few small uprising in Lazistan in the late 1830's, though these were put down without difficulty. In future wars, Laz and Ajarian irregulars would still be important to Turkey's defense in the southern Caucasus, but they would never again turn against the state or against each other.

It is unclear from western and Russian sources exactly how long the Himshiashvili family had been ruling in the highlands of Ajaria when the Sultans first began to limit the power of the *derebeys*. The Himshiashvilis are known to have participated in the Russo – Turkish war of 1806 –1812, but this is the first Western mention of them. As for the Abashidzes, despite their *Sancak Beyi* title, it is unclear how much real power they ever possessed. It is certain that they had been ruling in Batumi and lowland Ajaria from sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁹ It is not clear, however, whether the Abashidzes ever really controlled the whole of Ajaria. However, if the situation in Ajaria was typical of that elsewhere in the empire, the *Sancak Beyi* must have at one time wielded considerable power, which deteriorated in the course of the eighteenth century.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁹ David Darchiashvili, *Adzharia – Perekryestok Tsivilizatsii* (Tbilisi: unpublished paper, 1996), p. 3. It is possible that the “Aslan Bey of Batumi” mentioned above was an Abashidze. Unfortunately, the diplomatic dispatches that Anthony Bryer uses do not identify him more concretely, though the fact that Darchiashvili, citing Guram Sharadze, states that they ruled there during the first half of the nineteenth century (plus the fact that “Aslan” is a name that appears more than once in the Abashidze family history) suggest a connection. According to Ahmet Acar, in *Tarihte Hamşioğulları* (Ankara: Turizm Geliştirme Vakfı Yayındır, 1995), the first Abashidze to bear the title *Sancak Beyi* of Batumi was Mehmet Bey (another name that would recur in a famous Abashidze). He received the title in 1833, during the height of the revolt, no doubt in order to appease him and dissuade him from further rebellion.

In any event, the Abashidzes and Himshiashvilis lost their real power in the 1840's – 1850's, just as their neighbors had done a short while earlier. Sultan Abdul Mejid began in 1844 by attaching most of Ajaria to the *vilayet* of Trabzon. Four years later, Yusuf Abashidze, the last official *Sancak Beyi* was allegedly poisoned by the Sultan's government while in Trabzon.³⁰ In 1851, Ajaria, Kobuleti, Batumi and its southern approaches were reorganized into a *sanjak* of Lazistan. The *derebeys* were deprived of their ancestral land rights and their feudal duties. In their place they received pensions.³¹

Both Mahmut II and Abdul Mejid felt compelled to carry out these centralizing reforms in the face of the continuing political dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and its progressively more serious military setbacks. It had become clear by the nineteenth century that a feudal military organization was incapable of defending the empire against modern European forces. In addition, the constant internal warring between the *derebeys* was robbing the country of its chances for economic development. Divided and surrounded by virile imperial powers, the Ottoman Empire had come to a point in its fortunes that in many ways resembled that of Georgia in the fifteenth century. That its leaders took measures to halt and reverse the decay is to their credit. Most probably, the Ottoman Empire would not have survived into the twentieth century without their actions. There was bound to be, however, negative fallout from the subjugation of the old *timar* holding nobility, and one place in which it can be observed is in Ajaria. While Ajarian irregulars would continue

³⁰ Komakhidze, p. 198.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 3.

to be militarily useful to the Ottoman Empire throughout its existence, the suppression of the Laz and Ajarian revolts created a disgruntled nobility, some of whom would seek to improve their positions by taking new masters. Aslan Bey would not be the last Ajarian noble to throw his lot in with the Russians.

The Crimean War of 1853 – 1856 saw heavy fighting in Ajaria, but the end of the war saw no loss of Ottoman territory there, despite the victory of Russian forces at Kars. The war of 1877 – 1878, however, proved to be one of the most important events in the history of Ajaria, for it was this war which would separate the by now Muslim population of Ajaria from Turkey.

On the Caucasian front, the Ottoman forces adopted a primarily defensive posture out of necessity. As in the war of 1828 – 1829, Ajarian and Laz irregular troops were of great importance to this defensive effort. However, the outcome of the conflict was never really in doubt, as the much better trained and equipped Russian troops were able to outmaneuver their Ottoman opponents, and to win the major battles involving regular forces.³² The war of 1877 – 1878, though objectively a loss, could overall be considered a victory for the much-maligned Ottoman Empire. As with the First World War, opinion in Europe at the time held that the Asiatic organization of the empire was impervious to real change, and that its disintegration and break-up were only a matter of time. Talk of the “Eastern Question” had already begun. While the Ottoman armies had been reorganized, trained, and armed throughout the

³² For the role played by Ajarian irregulars, see Allen and Muratoff, pp. 123, 125, 126, 130, and 213.

preceding thirty-five years or so, they were not thought to be a match for the armies of the Russian Empire, which had emerged as the world's leading land power and the primary colonial rival to Great Britain. Indeed they were not. But just as in the First World War, the Ottoman armies were able to achieve some defensive successes (notably the famous defense of Plevna). Collapse was again staved off, but the Ottomans lost a strategic swath of territory, which ran all along their Caucasian border with the Russian Empire. With the Treaty of Berlin, all of what is today Ajaria was lost.

This loss was followed by a huge migration of Ajarians to Turkey. Many refugees sailed from Batumi to the Turkish Black Sea ports of Giresun, Ordu, Samsun and Sinop, as well as to Istanbul. Many Ajarians stayed in these regions, while others traveled to the provinces of Amasya, Adapazarı, Bursa and Balıkesir, regions which retain large Ajarian populations today.³³

Tsarist Ajaria:

The period between the Russian conquest of Ajaria and the First World War would see the urban parts of the region change beyond recognition. Even before the conquest, Christian Georgia had taken an interest in its lost southern regions; journalists had visited the area and written romantic reports, and intellectuals had taken up the cause of reuniting Georgians with their brothers in Turkey.³⁴ Yet reintegration would be a long time in coming. Many Ajarians were clearly more sympathetic to Turkey than to Russia even during the First World War, though enough integration had taken place by then that

³³ Paul Magnarella, *The Peasant Venture* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1979), p. 17.

³⁴ For example, see Ilia Chavchavadze cited in A. S. Bendianishvili, pp. 321 – 322.

there were also those who favored some form of union of Ajaria with Georgia – something unthinkable in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Following the Russian conquest, many Ajarians fled to lands still under Ottoman control rather than live under Christian rule. While Georgian intellectuals, influenced by the current of nationalism emanating from Europe, may have been ready to see the Ajarians as their brothers, for the majority of Christian and Muslim Georgians, religion, rather than language or history, was the primary token of identity. In Georgia at the time, Muslims were called “Turks” or “Tatars”, regardless of their ancestry. This way of conflating religious belief with what we would now call “national identity” was so strong that Georgians who followed Monophysite rites similar to those of the Armenian Orthodox church, rather than those of the Georgian Church, were commonly referred to as “Armenians” despite being fellow Georgian-speaking Christians. As in other parts of the former Ottoman and Russian Empires, this traditional way of conceptualizing identity has often survived nationalist and internationalist attempts to supplant it.

Despite the massive exodus, rural Ajaria retained its Muslim character. But while rural Ajaria slipped quickly back into its traditional obscurity, a slumber disturbed only temporarily by war and conquest, Batumi quickly became a major trading center with a population drawn from the diverse nations of the Russian Empire. In 1883, it became the western terminus of the south Caucasian rail system. The next year, work was begun on new port facilities. This period also saw the first plantings of tea; so important to the modern

economy of the entire southeastern Black Sea.³⁵ In 1878, Batumi was given “porto-franco” status in the Treaty of Berlin. This move was primarily intended to sweeten up the Europeans in advance of a major treaty violation. Due to its strategic location, it was decided that massive new fortifications were required which the treaty forbade. Despite being short-lived: the Russians unilaterally abolished Batumi’s status in 1886, “porto-franco” helped to foster a boom town economy, in addition to providing political cover for the fortifications.³⁶

The 1890’s saw an economic boom, as the city became a major refining and transshipment point for Baku oil. The industrialization of Batumi caused its cultural alienation from the surrounding rural regions, as the city went in less than a decade from being a sleepy Turkish town to one of the centers of the region’s industrial revolution. Ironically, the refineries of Batumi were to become hotbeds of a new political ideology, captivating workers who in many instances had made the transition to modernity just as quickly as the city itself: Marxist Socialism. Batumi was integrating itself into Georgian society in a way that could never have been expected.

In 1890, in response to falling pay linked to falling kerosene prices abroad, workers at the Rothschild refinery went on strike. In 1893, they struck the plant again.

³⁵ *Georgia – Adjarian Autonomous Republic*, p. 14.

³⁶ Darchiashvili, pp. 6 – 8.

The industrial workers of Batumi, university students, and nationalist intellectuals combined to make the decade of the 1890's into a period of unprecedented political and intellectual upheaval for Georgia.³⁷ Though few, if any, of the leaders of these movements were Muslims, the heady intellectual atmosphere of Batumi, and of Georgia as a whole, could not help but make an impression on young Ajarian intellectuals of the period.

Memed Abashidze was born in 1873. His fate was perhaps conditioned by the fact that his family had ruled in the town, rather than in the mountains like the Himshiashvilis, and thus his family was progressive by the standards of the time. Memed's father, Ibrahim, had opened the first Georgian-language school in Batumi in 1881. The school was also co-ed, which must have been quite controversial.³⁸ Memed himself would later study at the school. In Batumi, the Abashidzes, like other young Ajarians, would find themselves confronted by the modern western world in a more profound fashion than any other Muslims in the Caucasus, save the "Azerbaijanis" of Baku. As with other prominent Muslims of the Russian Empire, they were faced with the material and educational backwardness of their own people in comparison to the surrounding Christian communities. In the case of the Ajarians, this comparison was all the easier to make, as the neighboring Christian community shared the same language and many cultural traits. They were also faced with the new ideologies of Socialism and Nationalism, which were taking the educated and semi-educated populations of the Caucasus by storm. In the light

³⁷ Suny, pp. 157 – 159.

³⁸ "Vsyegruzinskii Soyuz Vozrozhdenia," campaign pamphlet produced by Aslan Abashidze's "All-Georgian Union for Revival" party for the 1995 elections, Batumi, 1995.

of these influences, the stance of Memed Abashidze and his followers is clearly understandable, though to many of his contemporaries, his conjunction of “Muslim” and “Georgian” was absurd.

The upheavals of the late nineteenth century were primarily limited to the educated classes in Georgia, and to the small, emerging industrial working class. At the turn of the century, the rebellious mood began to spread to the peasantry. One of the centers of revolt in Georgia in the years leading up to the 1905 revolution was Guria, Ajaria’s close linguistic and cultural Christian neighbor.

The Gurian peasantry was especially land poor, which made them suffer greatly under the terms of the so-called “emancipation” of the serfs. As throughout the empire, the serfs were obliged to indemnify their masters for the loss of land they suffered: an onerous prospect for any Russian peasant, but even more so for Georgian peasants, who generally received far less land. Gurian peasants, who farmed at subsistence level, were often still indebted to their former masters after nearly forty years. By 1905, it was clear that the government no longer controlled the situation in Guria. The social democrats were also left running to catch up with events, in order to channel the frustrations of the peasants in a socialist direction.³⁹ In this they eventually succeeded.

³⁹ Suny, p. 166.

It must not have been an easy task, for the peasants concerns were strictly utilitarian. Nikolai Marr, a native of Guria, found that they were neither moved by invocations of Church nor of nationality.⁴⁰ No doubt the Ajarian peasantry was similarly minded at this stage. Nonetheless, through diligent educational work, the social democrats of various stripes were able to convert Guria into a reliable base of support, whereas Ajarian peasants were to remain relatively quiet during the revolution of 1905.

Following the massacre of demonstrators in St. Petersburg on January 9, 1905, a wave of strikes swept Georgia. Again, the center of the unrest was in the west, with the workers of Batumi being joined by those in Poti, Sukhumi, Kutaisi, and Chiatura in a violent general strike. The peasant rebellion in the southwest also intensified.⁴¹

The peasants of Ajaria were less politicized than those of other parts of Georgia, and, linguistic links to Guria notwithstanding, they do not appear to have played a comparable role in the events of 1905 – 1907. No doubt some Ajarian workers in Batumi's shops and factories, or working elsewhere in Georgia, were caught up in the revolt. For the most part, however, the 1905 revolution involved only the most educated segments of the Ajarian population, which meant primarily the nobility.

Memed Abashidze and his brothers and cousins, along with other youthful sons

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167

of noble Muslim families, were involved in local revolutionary activities. Aslan Abashidze, Memed's brother, organized a "battalion" which fought battles with police in Batumi. In 1907 he was arrested and thrown in Batumi prison. Memed fled to Turkey, where he too was arrested and imprisoned in Trabzon in 1908.⁴²

The activities of the Abashidzes and other young noblemen, while they worried the authorities enough to get them arrested, no doubt had very little impact on Ajaria as a whole. The extent to which social democracy had become popular among the elite of Ajaria's youth is unclear. In voting for the first Russian Duma, Batumi returned one of the few conservative candidates, while the rest of the country was being swept by the Mensheviks.⁴³ Nonetheless, both the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks would later ally themselves with members of the two most notable clans in Ajaria: the Himshiashvilis and the Abashidzes.

Though Illarion Ivanovich Vorontsov-Dashkov, Viceroy of the Caucasus from 1905 – 1915, was a relatively liberal figure, especially by the standards of the "Stolypin reaction" which he survived, the social democratic movement in Georgia found itself repressed considerably in the years leading up to the First World War.⁴⁴ Ajaria itself remained relatively quiet.

⁴² Komakhidze, p.122- 123, 183 –184.

⁴³ Suny, p. 173. Prince Prokofii Shervashidze was a conservative not affiliated with any party. He was also not a Muslim.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

War, Revolution, and Georgian Independence:

The intellectuals of the Caucasus did not generally welcome the First World War. Few could have foreseen that it would, in the dissolution of the empire, afford an opportunity for independent Caucasian states. Within Georgia, many feared the ethnic tension that would be aroused by a war with Turkey. The only exceptions were certain Armenian groups, who quite naturally, given Russian gains in previous wars, assumed that the Russian empire would again expand at the expense of the Ottomans, and that this would mean unification with their brethren in Eastern Anatolia. Alexander Khatisov, the Armenian Kadet mayor of Tbilisi, wrote later in his memoirs that: “the Georgians and Tatars [Azerbaijanis] were opposed to the war. The Georgians had nothing to expect from the war; on the contrary, they were afraid of the Ajarians who, although Georgians, were Mohammedans and Turcophiles. The Tatars were afraid that the war might weaken Turkey. Only the Armenians wanted war.”⁴⁵

When war came, it did in fact exacerbate the divisions between Ajaria and Christian Georgia, as many Ajarians and Laz once again fought on the side of Turkey. For this, many of them were to pay dearly.

In 1914, Ajarians found themselves once again on the front lines between The Russian and Ottoman empires. As in those previous conflicts, Ajarian and Laz irregular troops were an important asset to the Turks:

With Turkey’s entry into the war in October 1914, the Muslims of the world were called to the *jihad* (holy war) against Russia

⁴⁵ Khatisov (Khatissian) *Memoirs*, (March 1950) vol. 3, no. 1 (9) p 106. Cited in Suny, p. 179.

and the Entente powers. Simultaneously, within the CUP leadership the idea of creating Turan, the unified empire of Turkic peoples under the Ottoman aegis, was endorsed. The pro-Ottoman sympathies among the Muslims of Transcaucasia were utilized for the purpose of propaganda or sabotage, and the call for insurgency against Russia was quickly answered by the Ajars of Georgia⁴⁶

At first the Muslims of the Caucasus were hopeful of success, but disaster struck the Ottoman armies in 1915. The Ajarians paid for their pro-Turkish loyalties as “the same year saw the ruthless suppression of the Ajars by the Russians....”⁴⁷ “Lyakhov ravaged and depopulated the entire Chorokhi valley up to Artvin, in the vicinity of which only 7,000 out of a previous population of 52,000 Georgian Muslims [sic] were left alive”⁴⁸

In 1916 the Russian army pushed further into Anatolia, pushing the front further from Ajaria and Lazistan. The movement of the front, perhaps combined with the brutal demonstration by the Tsarist forces, helped keep Ajaria relatively quiet through the next two years of war. In any event, there are no reports of further large-scale massacres.

Following the Bolshevik revolution the discipline of the Russian army on the Caucasian front began to deteriorate rapidly: by the end of the year organized resistance would have been impossible. Due to mass-desertions from the

⁴⁶ Tadeusz Swietochowski: “National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905 – 1920” *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*, ed. R. G. Suny (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 220.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ Lang, cited in Magnarella, p. 16.

Russian army, de-facto control of the front passed into the hands of the Transcaucasians:

“As only a few hundred Russian officers were prepared to continue the defense of the Caucasian front, Russian general headquarters was compelled to rely only on the national formations developed during the period of the provisional government. These bodies were more or less legalized by the establishment of a Transcaucasian federation which was set up in response to the transfer of power in Russia to the government of the soviets.”⁴⁹

The armies of the Armenians and the Georgians were tiny compared to the forces available to the Turks, while the “Tatars” (Azerbaijani Turks) looked hopefully towards a Turkish presence in the Caucasus. Accordingly, the Young Turk government undertook its reconquest of eastern Anatolia with great confidence, which was not misplaced. The offensive began in earnest near Erzincan on February 14th and by April 14th, “units of the Turkish 37th division, supported by Laz and Acar irregulars, attacked Batum.” The commander surrendered within a few hours.⁵⁰

Thus began the brief Turkish occupation of Batumi. The territory had been ceded to the Ottoman state by the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which had been announced only a month previously.⁵¹ The Transcaucasian government, which had not been a party to the negotiations, did not feel obliged to recognize the treaty’s validity, nor did any of its successor states. However, there was little

⁴⁹ Allen and Muratoff, p. 457.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 460 – 465.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

they could do other than protest to the Great Powers; they were in no position to retake territory lost to the Turks.

Soon after the fall of Batumi, on May 26th, Georgia proclaimed her independence. On June 4th, Turkey and Georgia signed a peace treaty, in which Turkey recognized Georgian independence.⁵² Almost immediately afterwards, German troops entered the country.

German occupation was a strange, but not wholly unfortunate interlude for the Georgians. It could certainly be said that the country was far worse run both before and after the occupation, which was generally popular.⁵³ For Turkey, however, it was a strain on its German alliance, as the Germans felt free to pursue their own interests independent of, and sometimes at the expense of, their Turkish allies.

One of the provisions of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, in keeping with its rhetoric about “self-determination”, was that plebiscites were to be held in various contested regions, to allow them to determine for themselves whether to accept the authority of the conquering government concerned or not. A plebiscite was to be held in “conditions of complete freedom” in the “Three Sanjaks” of Ardahan, Kars, and Batumi, which were granted to Turkey under the treaty. The Georgian government complained, in the run-up to the vote, that the Turks were oppressing the Ajarians, and preventing them from freely expressing their

⁵² Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia: 1917 – 1921* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951) p. 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

right of ethnic self-determination (which allegedly ran towards unification with Georgia). Despite continued Georgian government protests, the Turkish authorities in Batumi went ahead with the plebiscite in June-July 1918, which they won overwhelmingly.⁵⁴ The Georgian government was suspicious of Turkish motives for the plebiscite, assuming that the Young Turk government would rig the polls in order to legitimize Turkish rule. The Georgian government was encouraged in its protests by the German authorities, who made sympathetic noises, and suggested that they continue to press their complaints.⁵⁵

The Georgian Government made nine objections:

1. The referendum had been conducted while a state of siege was in force.
2. The preparatory work had been badly handled.
3. The referendum had been announced unexpectedly, and in only two languages, making it impossible for the Georgians even to learn about it.
4. At the time of the referendum a large portion of the inhabitants were not in Batum and were not able to return because of a prohibition by the Turkish authorities.
5. The vote had not been secret.
6. The Turks had influenced and even intimidated the voters.
7. Many citizens had not been allowed to vote.
8. Temporary residents, the Persians for instance, had been allowed to vote.
9. Ballots had been cast by nationality, thus restricting the freedom of the voters.⁵⁶

The vote counts provide evidence which supports the claim that the balloting had been less than entirely fair. According to Turkish census data, the male population of the three sanjaks at the time of the plebiscite was 161,908. Of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

these, 87, 048 were eligible to vote. Of these 85, 129 voted yes to Turkish rule, 441 voted no, and 1693 failed to vote. This means that about 98.5% of those eligible to vote voted yes, and that the pro-Turkish camp received more than 99.5% of votes cast. It also means that the Christian populations of the area voted overwhelmingly in favor of Turkish, rather than Georgian rule. In the Artvin region, where just under half of the population was non-Muslim, only three votes were recorded against Turkish rule, with 54 votes not cast. In Ardahan sanjak, which had a population of 68, 873 Muslims and 15, 007 non-Muslims, 22, 600 men voted yes, and only 54 no. The city of Batumi provided the most no votes at 160. Interestingly, 1483 men in Batumi didn't use their votes, the vast majority of the unused votes counted in the three sanjaks. On the face of it, this does lend support to the Georgian government's claim that many Christian Georgians in this region had been prevented or discouraged from voting.⁵⁷ In the end, however, German support for Georgian claims would be of little use, for the situation in the Caucasus, as in Europe, was about to change radically.

By October, German forces were retreating in Europe, and it became clear that Britain and her allies, not Germany, would dictate the shape of the peace. The Mudros armistice of October 30th obliged the Turkish army to withdraw west of the 1914 frontier, however the Turks managed to delay for another two

⁵⁷ Ahmet Gökdemir, *Cenûb-i Garbî Kafkas Hükûmeti* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 1998) pp. 20-22. The author's numbers do not exactly add up. From adding up the various totals given on p. 21 for the different regions, one comes up with 235 no votes, and 1747 votes not cast. These numbers, if correct, only give further support the claim that the vote was somehow rigged. Note: Only the vote totals given above are from Gökdemir, the interpretations are mine.

months. This delay enabled the Muslims of the three sanjaks to set up a provisional government: the Government of South-West Caucasia.⁵⁸

This organ, which professed to be the government of the three sanjaks, was proceeded by several short-lived councils and administrations: the “Ahıska Hükûmet-i Muvakkatı”, the “Aras Türk Hükûmeti”, and the “Kars İslam Şurası.” These organizations formed in the last days of October and the beginning of November, 1918. They lasted roughly a month.⁵⁹ Of these, the Kars İslam Şurası was have the most lasting importance, as it was to lead to the “Cenûb-i Garbî Kafkas Hükûmeti” – The Government of Southwest Caucasia, and would absorb the other two organizations.

On November 30, representatives from throughout the three sanjaks met in Kars at the “Great Congress” organized by the Kars İslam Şurası, known also as the Millî Şura, under the leadership of Fahreddin Piroğlu. The Kars İslam Şurası, had first met on November 14. At this meeting, it was resolved that a local military force would attempt to take control of installations being vacated by the retreating Turkish 9th army, in order to guard against the threat of Georgian or Armenian occupation. The importance of developing branches in Batum, Artvin and Ahıska was also emphasized.⁶⁰

Just three days after the first meeting of the Kars İslam Şurası, British troops entered

⁵⁸ Allen and Muratoff, p. 497.

⁵⁹ A. Gökdemir, pp. 35 – 62.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Baku. By the end of December, the British were ready to send troops for the occupation of Georgia, and informed the Georgian government of their intention to do so. The latter had no means at its disposal to resist, and so granted its permission.⁶¹ The British occupation of Transcaucasia had the effect of shifting the focus of opposition in the three sanjaks away from the Georgians and Armenians somewhat, though ultimately it was the fear of being torn away from Turkish rule and placed under the rule of their Christian neighbors which drove them to action.

At the Great Congress of November 30, the Aras Türk Hükûmeti and Ahıska Hükûmet-i Muvakkatası were formally absorbed into the Millî Şura, and several branches of the enlarged organization were founded in other towns of the region. In Ajaria, a Milli Şura branch was opened in Ardahan, under the direction of Dikkanlı Hafız Efendi and Rasim Beğ Hamşioğlu (Himshiashvili) which worked to prepare the people for struggle against the Georgian and Armenian forces.⁶²

On January 3 – 5, 1919, a small “congress” of 8 Milli Şura leaders, met at Rasim Beğ’s house in Ardahan. The assembled members reaffirmed the anti-Mudros stance of the Kars congress, resolving to fight rather than turn their arms over to the English conquerors. From the seventh through the ninth, a larger group met in what is styled the Second Ardahan Congress, or the Great Ardahan Congress. The delegates to this meeting came to similar decisions, additionally, they undertook to publicize their cause in sympathetic

⁶¹ Kazemzadeh, pp. 163 – 171.

⁶² Gökdemir, pp. 70 – 71.

newspapers, including *Sada-yı Millet* of Batumi. Yet another Hamşioğlu attended the second conference: Rüstem Beğ of Oltu.⁶³

The Millî Şura was able to arm its troops with captured Russian arms and supplies, left behind for them by the retreating Turkish army. Fighting soon broke out between these troops and Georgian and Armenian forces.

“The bands of Server Bey and Dikanli Hafız Bey [sic], about 500 strong, took over Akhaltzikhe from the retiring troops of Halit Paşa and drove a Georgian force up the Borjom defile beyond Atshur, the Turkish frontier fort of 1828. Strongly supported in the Kağızman district, the Kars plain, Oltu and the lower Çoruh country, the National Council [Millî Şura] was soon in a position to muster some 8, 000 men, armed from the abandoned Russian dumps taken over by the Turks at Kars and other points.”⁶⁴

The Millî Şura’s troops scored a similar success in the region of Khulo (Hula). On 7 June 1920, Ajarian forces surprised a detachment of Georgian troops near this important upland town, capturing 300 rifles, four machine guns and two cannons.⁶⁵ However, the Millî Şura’s victories were to be short lived. At the beginning of March, a Georgian force retook Atskhur, and then Akhaltzikhe and Akhalkalaki. At roughly the same time, a British force was sent to Kars, where they surrounded the building where the Şura was meeting and arrested many of its leaders. They were later sent into exile in Malta.⁶⁶ Rüstem Beğ

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 80. Another author claims that eight members of the Hamşioğlu clan were in attendance at the Ardahan congresses, and that they were held at the home of Celal Beğ, not Rasim Beğ Hamşioğlu. Curiously, he does not mention Rüstem Beğ as being among the eight in attendance. See: Ahmet Acar, p. 206.

⁶⁴ Allen and Muratoff, p. 498.

⁶⁵ *Türk İstiklâl Harbi* (Ankara: General Staff Publishing House, 1995), vol. 3, p. 85.

⁶⁶ Allen and Muratoff, p. 498.

from Oltu was apparently not taken – he went on to be selected for the first Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1920.⁶⁷

Soviet Ajaria: The Early Period:

Under the treaties of Moscow (March 7, 1921), and Kars (October 13, 1921) between the new governments of Turkey and the former Russian Empire, Ajaria was divided. The new boundary in Ajaria was less favorable to the Turks than the border of 1877, though they were compensated further east, by the recovery of Tuzluca and Iğdir.⁶⁸

Menshevik Georgia had enjoyed only a brief spell of independence, of which Ajaria had not really been a part. Unlike Christian Georgia, Ajaria had always been, with the exception of Batumi, relatively conservative and quiescent politically. Like in Christian Georgia, the conquering Bolsheviks found in Ajaria few natural allies, though in Ajaria the situation was, from a Bolshevik perspective, worse. At least socialism was widespread in most of Georgia - even if it was Menshevik socialism. In Ajaria, outside of Batumi, the very few social democrats there were belonged to the nobility (as was also often the case in Georgia as a whole) and the Bolsheviks, initially at least, had no choice but to deal with them. In Ajaria, the two leading families in the early part of the twentieth century were the Abashidzes and the Himshiashvilis. Perhaps surprisingly, the Bolsheviks found relatively willing partners from both clans.

⁶⁷ Gökdemir, p. 215. Curiously, the author refers to both Rasim and Rüstem Beğ Hamşioğlu somewhat interchangeably. Only Rasim appears in the index, but his name is used to index both names in the body of the text. Both men existed and took part in the Milli Şura's activities.

⁶⁸ Allen and Muratoff, p. 500.

Takhsim Khimshiashvili [sic] was a typical national enlightener, which made him more acceptable to the Bolsheviks. Yet Khimshiashvili lacked the stature of a Nestor Lakoba, an old Bolshevik with guerrilla background and uncontested local powerbase. This is part of the reason why the Ajarian identity and the derivative state autonomy never gained official acceptance, comparable to that enjoyed by Abkhazia.⁶⁹

Tahsin Himshiashvili was the head of the Ajarian Supreme Soviet from 1921 – 1924. It was under his authority that his rival, Memed Abashidze, was exiled. He was to be the first and last native Ajarian Muslim to lead the government of the Autonomous Republic.

Despite being officially atheist, the Bolsheviks of Georgia were both nationalist and chauvinist to a remarkable degree, both at this early date and later. Thus, despite their supposed antipathy towards religion in general, the Georgian Bolsheviks went to special pains to suppress Islam in Ajaria, in the name of reintegration.

In 1924 Khimshiashvili led a peaceful rebellion against the Georgian chauvinists, splitting the Soviet leadership of Ajaria and staging a separate session of the local soviets in the Moslem-populated [sic] mountains, outside Batumi. The unruly Ajarian was called to Tbilisi and, somewhat mysteriously, went insane during that trip.⁷⁰

Between Tahsin Himshiashvili's fall in 1924 and Aslan Abashidze's rise in

⁶⁹ Georgii M. Derluguian, "Historical Sociological Interpretation of Nationalist Separatism in the Four Former Soviet Autonomous Republics: Tataria, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Ajaria." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, SUNY Binghamton (1995), p. 231. From his surname and his prominence, it can be assumed that Tahsin Himshiashvili was a member of the same Hamşioğlu clan mentioned above. However, neither Gökdemir nor Acar mention him: he does not appear on any of Acar's rather confusing family lists.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

1991, Ajaria had no more Muslim Ajarian leaders. The beginning of the campaign against a separate identity for Ajarians was symbolized in their disappearance from the census statistics. In Tsarist statistics, Ajarians were counted separately from other Georgians, under the term “Muslim Georgians.” In an attempt to secularize their identity, the Soviet census of 1926 counted them as “Ajarians,” for the first and only time. After that, they dropped from statistical view, were merged into the category “Georgians,” and have still not reemerged.⁷¹

Collectivization: The Early Stalin Period:

The last recorded major act of Ajarian resistance was in the late 1920's⁷², when a campaign against the veiling of women caused a revolt. A few days after the declaration on veiling,

...the party resolved to close “all legal and illegally existing Muslim, Jewish, and sectarian religious schools.” The costs of such a policy were soon evident. By March anti-Soviet resistance was widespread in Ajaria... In almost all Muslim areas of Transcaucasia opposition increased, and the campaigns for collectivization were marked in those districts by an exceptional level of violence.”⁷³

Some party officials who foresaw the effect collectivization would have on the peasants of Ajaria tried to exempt the region from the program, or at least to minimize its impact. “Mamulia of the Muslim region of Ajaria tried to convince his comrades to exempt his region from full collectivization and

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 231 – 232.

⁷² Derluguian gives “late 1927” as the time for the beginning of the revolt (p.232). Suny, “at the very beginning of 1929” (Suny, p. 244).

⁷³ Suny, p. 244.

permit it to continue the policy of limiting the exploitive tendencies of the Kulaks, but he was denounced as an opportunist...”⁷⁴ “A virtual war between the state and the peasantry raged in the Muslim areas of Georgia and Armenia and throughout Azerbaijan. ‘Crude Errors’ by party cadres toward Muslim peasants led the Zakkraikom to modify its policy and to restrict repression and exiling of kulaks in those regions.”⁷⁵

To understand the Stalinist period in Ajaria, it is necessary to look at what was going on in Georgia as a whole. As the destruction of Ajaria’s religion-based identity continued rapidly, it came more and more to be like other regions of Georgia – and indeed the rest of the USSR. Georgia and the rest of Transcaucasia, which under Stalin was administered as more or less (sometimes more, sometimes less) of a political unit benefited from a succession of strong, relatively independent leaders. For the most part, these leaders were more moderate than those prevailing in the rest of the Soviet Union, although those who resisted the tyranny from center too strongly usually paid with their lives (it may be that the relative prosperity of Transcaucasia in the Soviet Union is in part explained by this). In Georgia, even more than in the rest of the Soviet Union, the Stalinist period is also identified with one other major personality besides Stalin’s own - a name hardly associated with moderation - that of the Mingrelian Lavrenti Beria. Beria’s career began in Transcaucasia, and so he shaped policy there from an early date.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Beria and the High Stalinist System:

According to Ronald Suny, "At every level moderate views prevailed among local [Transcaucasian] Communists well into 1929. Though no organized faction of the Right existed, many party members held that collectivization was inappropriate in Transcaucasia."⁷⁶ This was just before the "'great turning point' in the collectivization campaign throughout the Soviet Union."⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that up until this time the Transcaucasus had been spared the war against the Kulak and collectivization. However, this may have only made the ensuing few months even worse for the peasants. "In Georgia the percentage of collectivized households rose rapidly - from 3.5 in October 1929 to 63.7 by March 1930."⁷⁸ Rapid collectivization and the war against the Kulaks was accompanied by religious persecution, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

This shift in policy was brought about by removing Mamia Orakhelashvili, the moderate head of the Transcaucasian Territory Party Committee (Zakkraikom) and client of Orjonikidze and replacing him with a non-Caucasian from Belorussia. Six months later, after Stalin's "Dizzy with Success" article, this outsider was replaced with another strong Georgian moderate, V. V. ("Beso") Lominadze.⁷⁹ Under Lominadze and with the publication of "Dizzy with Success," which allowed peasants to leave the cooperatives if they wished, collectivization levels plummeted. In Georgia, they reached 16.2 % by October 1930.⁸⁰ Lominadze was then sacked for being openly critical of Stalin

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 249 – 250.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

(he would be executed in 1935) and replaced by the harder line Kartvelishvili (1891 - 1938). Collectivization rates again rose, but by the spring of 1932, Transcaucasian rates were still the lowest in the USSR, at 41.6%.⁸¹

In comparison, Daghestan and the Transcaucasian Union Republics were considerably less collectivized. In these regions, the number of deportation victims was smaller, and the Transcaucasus never experienced a famine. A large number of Azeri, Armenian and Georgian peasants joined the kolkhozes only in 1936 and 1937. In July 1937, the Union's average of collectivized farms was 93 percent; at the same time, the percentages were only 86.5 percent in Azerbaidzhan [sic], 88.7 percent in Armenia, and even only 76.5 percent in Georgia. In Georgia, private agriculture has remained unusually important. Around 1970, private acreage produced around 40 percent of agricultural yield; this is one of the reasons why Georgia has a relatively high standard of living.⁸²

By this time, Lavrentii Beria had risen to become the head of the Georgian GPU (formerly the Cheka). He had already acquired a reputation for ruthlessness and for doing away with those who crossed him, including his superiors.⁸³ It was perhaps for this reason that when Stalin "proposed" that Beria be appointed as the Second Secretary for the Transcaucasian Central Committee and thus Kartvelishvili's deputy, he refused to work with him. This turned out to have been an unwise move on Kartvelishvili's part, as Beria had already ingratiated himself with Stalin. In the event, Stalin announced that Kartvelishvili would be removed and replaced with Mamia Orakhelashvili, with Beria as Second Secretary. At the same time, Stalin made Beria First

⁸¹ Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*. Translated by Forster and Forster. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 94

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸³ Amy Knight, *Beria, Stalin's First Lieutenant* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 44.

Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party. This marked the beginning of the end for the old Bolsheviks in Transcaucasia:

Two weeks before the "election" of Beria was announced publicly, the Central Committee in Moscow issued a resolution on 31 October, criticizing Transcaucasian party leaders for "gross errors" in the process of collectivization and in economic work, as well as for exhibiting local nationalism and extending too much personal influence. This announcement foreshadowed the extensive personnel changes in the party and state apparatus that Beria was to initiate after coming to power in Georgia.⁸⁴

Previous Georgian and Transcaucasian leaders had occasionally worked independently of the Center or even clashed with Stalin. Stalin thought that Beria would not - at least in the short term. He had no political base in the Caucasus outside of the GPU. Beria was Stalin's client and would do Stalin's bidding. At the same time, Beria set up a patronage network of his own. While Patron-Client relationships were becoming the normal form of political organization in the Soviet Union, Beria's "khvost" (literally "tail", his group of clients) was to be the most developed, powerful, and longest lasting.⁸⁵ In the four years after he became Georgian First Secretary, most of the old bolsheviks still in the leadership were replaced, often with GPU men. He also made things so difficult for Orakhelashvili that the latter left his job of his own accord, so that in 1932, Beria moved to head of the Transcaucasian party.⁸⁶ While head of the party in Transcaucasia and Georgia, Beria did much to encourage the

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁵ For a general discussion of Patron-Client relations, See "Clientelism and the Roots of Post-Soviet Disorder" by Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change*. ed. R. G. Suny (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). This article also contains a detailed description of Beria's organization. For more information about Beria in this regard see "National Cadres as a Force in the Soviet System: The Evidence of Beria's Career, 1949 - 53" by the same author, in *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*. J. Azreal Ed. (New York: Praeger, 1978).

⁸⁶ Knight, pp. 49 - 50.

personality cult of Stalin. He furthered this by, among other things, "writing" a book: *On the History of the Bolshevik Organizations in Transcaucasia*, which completely falsified and glorified the role of Stalin while tearing down a number of old bolsheviks. Beria later had the actual author of the book shot. Along the way, Beria found time to create his own personality cult. In this he was assisted by his own clients; Azerbaijan party chief Bagirov, for example. Bagirov also created his own personality sub-cult.⁸⁷ It would last as long as Beria remained alive and Bagirov even lasted a few years longer. Such was the unusual stability of the Beria patronage system that much of it survived the purges, the war, the anti-"bourgeois nationalism" and "cosmopolitanism" campaigns, and would only be finally dismantled with the arrest of Beria himself. For an explanation of why this happened, we must look at the Great Terror in the Transcaucasus.

Beria had carefully and systematically built up a loyal following in Georgia, establishing a solid base for his rule there. The full-scale purge of 1937 - 38 was to create disarray and disorganization in the Georgian party and state apparatus, even forcing Beria to sacrifice some of his loyal henchmen. However amoral and sadistic Beria was, he was not, at his point at least, irrational. He did not suffer from the paranoia and megalomania that provided the ultimate motivation for Stalin to implement the "Great Terror."⁸⁸

Beria seemed intent on limiting the purge in Georgia to the most vulnerable former oppositionists, but his maneuver was checked by the central authorities.⁸⁹

Both of the above authors stress that Beria's resistance to the purges of the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸⁸ Knight, p. 78

⁸⁹ Suny, p. 275

Ezhovshchina had nothing to do with morality. It was simply that he had already purged his own machine (although not in nearly as bloody a fashion as would come to be associated with the word "purge" in the Soviet context) and he felt that further purging was likely only to weaken him (though in the event, that did not happen). That is, of course, exactly what Stalin intended. Stalin disapproved of the patronage networks and "family circles" that were developing in the Soviet Union. He saw them as a threat to his unlimited power and set out to break them. For Beria, as for others, the trick was to purge enough party members to avoid being purged oneself, while still maintaining a base of power. After an article appeared in Pravda hinting that the Transcaucasian parties had not been self-critical enough at their recent congress, Beria realized he had to move more vigorously. By the end of the Ezhovshchina, the Transcaucasians had been more than bloody enough to satisfy Stalin. So much so, in fact, that in 1938 Beria was named to succeed Ezhov as head of the former-GPU, now known as the NKVD.⁹⁰

The new appointees were unquestioningly loyal to Stalin. But they were also clients of Beria's. At this point the question arises: "Why did Stalin allow Beria to maintain his *khvost*, and even to expand it, if the point of the purges had been to eliminate them?" Perhaps he saw in Beria a creature of his own making, underestimating the extent to which he had built an independent power base. Perhaps he did not realize the extent of it until Beria started to transfer his own people to the central NKVD. Or as Knight suggests, perhaps he had no choice. After having purged the NKVD on the two successive occasions of

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 275 - 277

eliminating Iagoda and Ezhov, he had too few experienced and competent secret policemen to do without Beria.⁹¹ Eventually he must have realized how strong Beria was, and it has even been suggested that he feared him, but if this was the case later, it certainly was not in 1938. Perhaps the answer lies in the patronage system, which Stalin only intended to control, not to destroy. In order for the system to work, the patron must deliver something: advancement, protection, and so on, to the client in exchange for assistance in carrying out the patron's work. In the purge cycle of the 30's, potential clients took advantage of or caused the downfall of others in the attempt to win favor with the

patron. This happened at the top level, eg: Stalin - Beria, and replicated itself down to the level of the local official or enterprise director looking for someone to denounce their fellow workers. This system depended upon some client eventually being rewarded. Simply put; if Stalin hadn't stopped the cycle of purges, regional officials would have lost their motivation for carrying them out.

Among the victims of the purges of 1937 in Ajaria was Memed Abashidze. Given his background, it is actually rather surprising that he wasn't eliminated in the early 1920's along with other members of the Georgian nobility. His close links with the Mensheviks, though he was never a member of the party, should also have doomed him. Nevertheless, he survived his period of exile in Baku and became the head of the Writers Union. His very late date of elimination suggests that he managed to ingratiate himself with Georgia's

⁹¹ Knight, p. 90.

Stalin-era leadership. Derluguian even suggests that “Stalin had some personal obligations to Memed-bek,” though he doesn’t spell out what the nature of those obligations might be.⁹²

Even in the postwar period, in the last days of Stalin and Beria’s reign, party officials in Georgia maintained a clientelist relationship with Beria. This was especially so in Beria’s native Mingrelia, but also in Ajaria. That this was so should come as no surprise, given that Ajaria’s political leadership had been purged of locals. During the events surrounding the “Mingrelian Conspiracy” purges of 1951 – 52, the officials of the Ajarian *obkom* (the Abkhaz and Ajarian Autonomous Republics had *oblast* status within the Georgian Communist Party) were heavily purged. “This purge, which passed through several stages, seems to have been most extensive in Western Georgia (the historical Mingrelia, Guria, Svanetia, and Imeretia) and in Tiflis and its surroundings. As time went on, the Adzhar ASSR and Kakhetia (extreme Eastern Georgia) were also heavily affected.”⁹³

The “Mingrelian Conspiracy” affair was invented by Stalin to destroy Beria, who had become too powerful. In effect, he was being accused, indirectly, of being a Mingrelian nationalist. It should be stressed that this affair was entirely bogus, and that Beria, though far more connected with his homeland and less Russified than Stalin, was hardly a Mingrelian nationalist. Accordingly, one should certainly not imagine that because his patronage network extended

⁹² Derluguian, p. 231.

⁹³ Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., “Clientelism and the Roots of Post-Soviet Disorder” p. 358, and p.342, n.1.

strongly into Ajaria, that it was a sign either of Beria's support for Ajarian autonomy or conversely, represented some sort of Mingrelian domination. By the postwar period, the "autonomy" of Ajaria was even less significant than that of Abkhazia, and was primarily expressed burocratically – the above-mentioned *oblast* status which the region would not rate otherwise.

The Post-Stalin Era

The post-Stalin years are a historical blank for Ajaria. The region had by this time been entirely assimilated by Georgia, its leaders were never Muslim Ajarians, the regions autonomy had long since become a fiction. Denied the right to practice their religion, the Muslims of Ajaria became almost entirely like their Christian neighbors. As with minority groups throughout the Soviet Union, intermarriage among the more educated classes became relatively common. Only in the most remote regions did poor peasants maintain a sense of distinctness. These people had relatively little contact with Christian Georgians or with the outside world. Though they were unable to build mosques or to overtly practice their religion, some of them were able to maintain their collective memory. As in other parts of the Caucasus, clan allegiances were maintained and channeled into the clientelistic Soviet system. It was these people who Aslan Abashidze bussed down from the mountains, motivated perhaps by religious loyalties, perhaps by clan ties, most likely by both, as these two types of identity traditionally maintain a symbiotic relationship.

The *perestroika* period brought demands for greater ethnic autonomy from minority groups throughout the Soviet Union. However, the process of assimilation was so thoroughgoing in Ajaria that there was almost no stirring of ethnic feelings before the chauvinistic rule of Gamsakhurdia. According to one source, there was a group which formed in 1989, whose aim was to protect the status of Ajaria. It was quite small however, and little is known about it.⁹⁴ It is not clear how much the republic's status mattered to ordinary people at this time. Certainly the maintenance of Ajaria's republican status was of importance to the local *nomenclatura* – as mentioned above, it gave them more clout in Soviet Georgian politics than they would otherwise have had.

⁹⁴ Mike Dravis, "Adzhar in Georgia," ([Http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidem/mar/gadzhar.htm](http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidem/mar/gadzhar.htm)).p. 3. The author mentions the existence of the group, but not its name or other particulars.

CHAPTER II:

ASLAN ABASHIDZE: THE MODERN *DEREBEY*.

Introduction:

The Ajarian Autonomous Republic was the only autonomous republic of the Soviet Union to be founded ostensibly on the basis of religion. Ajarians are descended from Georgian Christians who accepted Islam during the three hundred years of Ottoman rule over southeast Georgia. After the Russo – Turkish war of 1877-78, Batum fell in to the hands of the Russian Empire, while the remainder of the former *vilayet* of Batum was divided between the two combatants. Again in 1920, the treaty of Kars left the border between Turkey and the new Soviet Union running through the land of the Ajarians, though this time the line was adjusted somewhat in favor of Turkey.¹ At the insistence of the new regime in Ankara, those Ajarians who could not be incorporated into the Turkish Republic were included in a new autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. This move was supposed to ensure a Muslim future for the province, both for the sake of the local population and for the border security of Turkey; which had relied on Ajarian and Laz irregulars on the Caucasian front during the First World War and in the Russo – Turkish wars of the nineteenth century. This policy can only be called a failure on both counts. The Bolsheviks punished the Autonomous Republic as hard or harder than any other part of Georgia during their campaigns against

¹ “In this area the frontier, less favorable to the Turks than that of 1877, ran from the village of Sarp, on the Black Sea a few miles south of Batum, east to the crossing of the Çoruh near the village of Maradidi. The frontier then followed the northern boundaries of the former Russian circuits of Artvin and Ardahan to the line of the Arpa-çay. Along the south-eastern sector of the frontier, the Turks received some compensation for their forfeiture of the Batum region in the districts of Tuzluca and Iğdir which had been under Russian sovereignty since 1828.” W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 500.

religion, while the border between Turkey and Ajaria eventually became part of the front line between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The orientation of the local inhabitants would have counted for little in the event these two titans clashed.

Ironically, it took the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Georgia to bring about real autonomy for Ajaria. The government of the republic, lead since 1991 by Aslan Abashidze, took advantage of the chaos occasioned by these events to assert real authority for the first time in its eighty-year history. At present, the government in Tbilisi exercises little more real power in Ajaria than in Abkhazia, though this situation developed under greatly different circumstances and exhibits a very different official face. The “Ajarian Revolution” was accomplished in only a few days, with very little bloodshed. Since 1991, the republic has been the most stable and secure region in all of Georgia. Aslan Abashidze and his party, the “All-Georgian Union for Revival” have become a political force to be reckoned with in the Georgian opposition, while in Ajaria itself they face practically no organized opposition. Yet, while the former Soviet Union’s only confessionally-based autonomy has experienced a resurgence, it is not clear to what extent the people whose self-determination it is supposed to further have experienced a similar “Revival.” In the opinion of some authors, the Ajarians of Georgia haven’t emerged from the Soviet period with a sense of being a separate ethnos or sub ethnos at all; the impact of the Soviet campaigns against religion being more than a minority whose sense of “difference” was founded on religion could stand. While their sense of separateness had endured for a time after the revolution, “[the]

Georgian communist leadership under Beria reacted to such stubbornness with measures increasingly ordering on ethnocide.”² Other authors and Georgian nationalist politicians have spoken of a Muslim revival in the region and the danger of Islamic fundamentalism. The truth is between these two views. While the extent of existing Muslim sentiment is hard to determine, Islam clearly plays some role in the lives of Ajarians and in the politics of the republic. According to Ajarian officials themselves, Islam is still important in the countryside, though much less so in towns.³ Islam is less in evidence along the coasts than further inland, and is probably least important in the city of Batumi. According to late Soviet-era statistics Batumi is only about 65% Georgian, a figure that includes both Muslims from Ajaria and the numerous Christian Georgians who have come to the city during Soviet and Tsarist times.⁴

Aslan Abashidze’s use of Religion in Political Discourse:

Aslan Abashidze, a descendent of one of Ajaria’s princely Muslim families, may at first glance seem to be an ideal rallying point for religiously based separatism or autonomy, perhaps even the monarchism which has made a small comeback in post-communist Russia and parts of Eastern Europe. According to Liz Fuller, opposition to Abashidze seems to be confined to the Christian population of Ajaria. Other authors have suggested a greater level of support

² Georgii M. Derluguian, “Historical Sociological Interpretation of Nationalist Separatism in the Four Former Soviet Autonomous Republics: Tataria, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Ajaria.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, SUNY Binghamton (1995) p. 233.

³ Paul Henze “Turkey and Georgia: Expanding Relations,” RAND paper, 1992.

⁴ Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1995), p. 75. According to statistics from the late 1980’s, the populations of both Tbilisi and Batumi were only about 65% Georgian. Neither Soviet nor post Soviet statistics mention “Ajarians”, with the sole exception of the year 1926. In Tsarist

for Abashidze among rural dwellers in Batumi's mountainous hinterland than among the residents of Batumi and the communities of the coastal lowlands.⁵ This seems to support the thesis that there is an ethno-religious factor working in favor of Abashidze, as the population of the highlands is more traditional and more religious than the townsfolk, and there should be fewer migrants from Christian parts of Georgia among them.

One of the few solid pieces of evidence available to support this claim is related to the events that followed Zviad Gamsakhurdia's attempts to revoke the autonomy of the region. In April 1991, in what one author has called the "Ajarian Revolution,"⁶ Aslan Abashidze and the so-called "Muslim Public Committee" bused peasants down from the mountains for a protest against the proposal. The protests turned violent and clashes with Gamsakhurdia supporters resulted in several deaths, including the death of Nodar Imnadze, the deputy chairman of the Ajarian Supreme Soviet and Abashidze's chief rival for power. According to official reports from Batumi, Imnadze had tried to kill Abashidze, rushing into a government meeting with a loaded gun, but was shot by guards before he had a chance to fire.⁷

statistics Ajarians are counted as a distinct group under the name "Muslim Georgians" (*Gruzinskii Mussulman*).

⁵ "The Lion Roars," *Georgia Profile* (November 1997). Note: *Georgia Profile* and its successor *The Profile* are English-language magazines published somewhat irregularly in Tbilisi.

⁶ Derluguian, pp. 237 – 241.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239. Imnadze had been head of the local Round Table organization, but was passed over for the Chairman's position by Gamsakhurdia himself, who apparently thought that the Abashidze family name would lend credibility to the Round Table's rule in Ajaria. See also David Darchiashvili, *Adzharia – Perekrystok Tsivilizatsii* (Tbilisi: unpublished paper, 1996).

As the founding event of the Abashidze regime this event carries some weight: it could be claimed that Abashidze came to power on the backs of a popular Muslim peasant uprising. There are, however, several reasons to reject this interpretation of events. First, there is some cause to believe that the peasants who took part in the demonstration were not doing so for political reasons, but rather because they had been offered some kind of compensation; perhaps simply food and drink and a good day out.⁸ This kind of officially sponsored “spontaneous demonstration” would not have been the first of its kind in the former USSR. However, the fact that the protests were almost certainly orchestrated by Abashidze and those close to him does not necessarily prove that the protesters were not motivated by religious concerns. The possibility remains that they were at least in part reacting to Gamsakhurdia’s very Christian brand of nationalism and were worried about what it might mean to be Muslims in a militant Christian state.⁹ The “movement” was, however, of very short duration and nothing like it ever recurred. If there had ever been a genuine popularly based Muslim movement in Ajaria, it petered out almost immediately: nothing was ever heard of the Muslim Public Committee after the

⁸ “Hunting Lions in Adjara,” *Georgia Profile* (June 1997).

⁹ It was in connection with Gamsakhurdia that Ajaria first became a footnote in the Western media’s coverage of Georgia. Such worthies as Strobe Talbot, who mentioned Ajaria in passing (the “Adzhars”) in an article for *Time* have no doubt had few occasions to concern themselves with it since. This is because unlike some of the other minorities mentioned in the article: the Abkhazians, Armenians, Ossetians, Russians and Azerbaijanis, the Ajarians have been quiet since the ascension of Abashidze. According to Talbot, many members of these groups did not consider Gamsakhurdia to be their president. Strobe Talbot, “Growls in the Garden,” *Time* (June 10, 1991). For similar observations see J. Bernstein, “Georgia’s Political Theater,” *The American Spectator* (March, 1992). This article also deals with Gamsakhurdia and the Helsinki Union of Georgia’s about-face on the Meskhetians – Muslims from the Turco-Georgian border region east of Ajaria, who were deported from their homes in 1944. The Helsinki Union championed the Meskhetians right to return to their homes in 1970’s, but in 1989 the group attached the proviso that they should first drop their Turkish names in favor of Georgian ones and convert to Christianity.

end of the events in April 1991. There has been no overt political use of Islam either by Abashidze or anyone else since.¹⁰

Indeed Abashidze has handled the religious question carefully, even the question of his own religious affiliation. Although Abashidze was born into a historically Muslim family, the question of his current religious affiliation is a closely held secret. Some writers have held that Abashidze is a Muslim, while others claim he has been baptized and is now a practicing Christian.¹¹ There are those who say that they have seen him at church on Sunday, and others who are sure that he goes to the mosque on Friday.¹² Whatever the truth about his own religious beliefs (if any) Abashidze has tried to show support and tolerance towards all of the religions of Ajaria, both in his statements and in terms of material support. His government has provided funds for the restoration of churches, mosques and a synagogue in the republic. In addition, new mosques are being built in rural areas, in what has proven to be the most controversial element of his religious program.

The number of new and newly reopened mosques in rural Ajaria is unclear. According to one source, in up to half of the villages in the republic, mosques have been reopened.¹³ Funds for the construction of these mosques, as well as for the restoration of the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi are rumored to have come from a variety of sources, both within the republic and abroad. One source of

¹⁰ Derluguian, "Sociological Interpretation of Nationalist Separatism," p. 236.

¹¹ See for example: Gia Nodia, "Loyal or Dangerous?" *WarReport*, (February 1991), Mikhail Globachev, *New Times*, September 1998. Pyotyr Konstantinov, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 23, 1998.

¹² Derluguian, p. 236.

¹³ Interview with Prof. Nugzar Mgeladze, Batumi, November 1997.

support for Islam emanating from Turkey is Ihlas Holding, which has provided religious literature for Ajaria's new mosques. Support may also be coming from other sources of "Islamic capital" in Turkey. Turkish businessmen and other private individuals, some no doubt with roots in the area, have also come to help reestablish Islam in the area. Within the republic, both local Muslims and the government have contributed.¹⁴ On at least one occasion, Abashidze himself has solicited funds from the Turkish government to be used in the construction of a mosque in Batumi.¹⁵ Such overtly pro-Islamic rhetoric is strictly for Turkish consumption: while a campaign brochure of the All-Georgian Revival Party refers briefly to the building of "churches and chapels" for followers of all different religions, it does not refer explicitly to the construction of mosques.¹⁶ Aslan Abashidze's government has also sought to exclude so-called "fundamentalist" Islam, especially Iranian-backed groups, from entering Ajaria. According to one source, the Iranian government, or a group connected with it, offered to buy all of the tea that the region could produce, in exchange for being allowed to set up an Iranian-run TV station.¹⁷

¹⁴ Personal Interviews with Batumi Muslims.

¹⁵ Inanç Uysal, "Batum'a cami isteği," *Zaman* (June 28, 1998). Abashidze made the request to Mesut Yilmaz, then Prime Minister of Turkey, when the two met in Rize on the Turkish Black Sea coast. Interestingly, during the same meeting, Abashidze claimed that 80% of the population of Batumi was Muslim (which contradicts official figures) and that Muslims in the villages "are continuing their traditions;" ...

¹⁶ *Vsyegruzinskii Soyuz Vozrozhdeniya*. A campaign brochure in Russian, 1995. Other informational literature published in English and in Russian by the state information agency "Ajaria" also neglect to mention the building of mosques, while highlighting the republican government's achievements in constructing churches and secular buildings. See *Georgia: Adjarian Autonomous Republic*, an as yet unpublished PR brochure from the Ajaria news agency.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Tefik Okyayuz, former Turkish Ambassador to Georgia.

Background - Christianity, Islam, and Georgian National Identity:

Georgian Christians, who even in Ajaria consider themselves followers of the “true” religion of Georgia, have not always appreciated these efforts. Gamsakhurdia is reported to have disapproved of the rebuilding of the minaret for the Aziziye Mosque. Bishop Iov of Batumi was supposedly forced by the republican government to step down after criticizing its mosque-building policies.¹⁸ More than the mosques themselves, the construction of minarets has been controversial as they symbolize for some Christians the rule of Islam over the country.¹⁹ As with their neighbors the Armenians, the idea of a civilized Christian nation constantly embattled by surrounding Muslims hordes is an important part of the Georgian national psychology.²⁰ This aspect of the Georgian national identity is so pronounced that its importance comes through strongly even in the writings of some Soviet Georgian historians.²¹ It is for this reason that Georgian writers wishing to show that Ossetia or Abkhazia are properly part of Georgia will often assert that the churches in these lands were part of the Georgian church.²²

This strong Orthodox Christian identity also inevitably leads Georgian writers

¹⁸ Interview with Irakli Kamkamidze, Tbilisi, November 1998.

¹⁹ Mgeladze, interview.

²⁰ Gia Nodia “Georgia’s Identity Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* (January, 1995), vol. 6, no. 5, pp. 106-107.

²¹ According to Shota Meskhia: “The rise of Christian Georgia and her successes in the struggle against the Seljuk Turks could not have remained unnoticed by European states, especially by the organizers of the Crusades. Georgia’s victory in the war of liberation, which resulted in the weakening of the Seljuk forces, no doubt, served the Crusaders’ purpose, giving them a free hand in the Near East.” Shota Meskhia, *An Outline of Georgian History* (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1968), p. 17. Note that a war of religion is turned into a “struggle” for “national liberation.”

²² For example: Menteshashvili 1992, p. 20, and Lordkipanidze (n.d.).

to downplay or to deny the role of Islam in the lives of many Georgians and minorities living within "historic" Georgia. The process of Islamicization is usually portrayed as non-voluntary, even brutal, and its foreignness is emphasized.²³ Often it is asserted that Muslim Georgians have always been less than sincere in their beliefs, or even that they practiced a kind of semi-conscious crypto-Christianity. Evidence for this consists in certain Christian beliefs and practices that have apparently been preserved in the community. Ajarians have traditionally used Christian decorative motifs in the design of their mosques: so-called "hidden crosses" and bunches of grapes: the symbol of wine. At home, they use the symbol of the cross for good luck and to ward off evil. Like other Georgians, they are supposedly great drinkers of wine, hiding this fact from their more pious neighbors by drinking out of the same glasses that Turks traditionally use for tea.²⁴

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Ajarians who live on the Georgian side of the border may indeed follow certain customs associated with Christianity in Georgia. Whether these Christian customs are holdovers from the pre-Islamic practices of Ajarians - or are the result of more recent assimilation - is unclear.²⁵ Of course, the carry-over of traditions from earlier religions in a

²³For example: "The Islamicization of Christian Ajaria [sic] was a painful process.... As a result of coercive Islamicization an unprecedented demographic crisis occurred in Ajaria" (Mgeladze 1994, p. 14). In an interview with this writer in November 1998, he emphasized that "the culture of mosques and minarets" was irreconcilable with "the Georgian spirit."

²⁴See Nugzar Mgeladze, "Ajarians," *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), p. 15. Also see: Irina Mazilkina, "Batumi: Pogranichnie Remarki," *Rodina: Rossiia i Turtzia, 500 let* (1998), p. 148. Similar claims have also been made about the Abkazians. See Avtandil Menteshashvili, *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia: 1918 - 1922* (Tbilisi: Samshoblo, 1992), pp. 20 - 21.

²⁵ These questions have been addressed in two very interesting studies by a student of Ajarian origin at Bilkent University. Asude Gündoğdu interviewed Ajarians from Georgia and Turkey, including her relatives and leaders of Ajarian cultural organizations in Turkey. An Ajarian immigrant from Georgia, and a Turkish Ajarian who had grown up in a mono-ethnic village near Sinop, were both asked whether Georgian brides and grooms use the symbol of the cross

community does not necessarily show that its members are not fervent believers of the new religion, though some Georgian scholars have asserted as much.²⁶ Indeed a parallel can be drawn between the spread of Islam in Ajaria and the spread of Christianity in Georgia thirteen centuries earlier. Following the Ottoman conquest of southeastern Georgia in the second half of the sixteenth century, Islam was spread in much the same way as in the Empire's European possessions, though some western writers have also implied that policies in the Caucasus were more harsh than those applied to the Balkans²⁷. Although the *Millet* system ensured freedom of religion to the Christian and Jewish communities of Georgia, there were considerable advantages to being a Muslim. Only Muslims could serve in the army, and army service was a prerequisite for owning land. Non-Muslims also had to pay heavier taxes. Thus, many of Ajaria's most prominent families converted to Islam, as did ordinary landed peasants, in order to retain their land and status. The circumstances surrounding this "forced conversion" were somewhat different than those that obtained nearly thirteen centuries earlier when the pagan Georgians converted to Christianity, though the conversion proceeded along much the same lines. True, there was no occupation, but the Georgian nobility of the day willingly converted to the religion of the Romans for reasons of political expediency.²⁸ While the court and the nobility were willing, the

for good luck or fertility. The Georgian respondent answered that Ajarian newlyweds in small villages do make the sign of cross over the door of their new house, in the belief that this will promote fertility. The Turkish respondent claimed never to have seen anyone make the sign of the cross for any reason in his village. Asude Gündoğdu, "Konu: Göç Eden Gürcüler, Tür: Röportaj," p. 9, and "Açara Bölgesi ve Halkının Etnik Kimliği" Konusunda Görüşler," p. 22. Both studies were prepared for Prof. Hakan Kırımlı. Interestingly, the customs of Ajarians in Turkey differ in few particulars from those of other Turks. Again, whether this way of life or that of Ajarians in Georgia is more authentic is unclear.

²⁶ For example, the above cited Prof. Mgeladze.

²⁷ Allen, p. 147.

²⁸ Lang, p.94

peasantry of Georgia clung more tenaciously to the old religious beliefs. Those who refused conversion were burdened with heavy taxes. Initially, the old religion went underground, camouflaged by the observance of Christian rituals.²⁹ In Svanetia and elsewhere, Paganism was still so intertwined with Christianity in the beginning of this century that some considered the Highlanders as much Pagan as Christian.³⁰ In some remote parts of Georgia, Christianity and Paganism are still very much intertwined today.³¹ In the case of the Georgian Highlanders, as in the case of the Abkhaz, it could be argued that Paganism has survived to such an extent that the new religion covers a kind of crypto-Paganism. However, it is probably more correct to view the old and new beliefs as in coexistence, neither one necessarily weakening or vitiating the other. In any event, it will take more than the discovery of some crosses or even a fondness for wine to substantiate claims of crypto-Christianity in Ajaria.

Memed Abashidze and the Reunification of Ajaria with the Georgian "Motherland:"

At the entrance to Batumi's refurbished seaside park, not far from the Supreme Soviet building and the offices of the Revival party, stands a new statue of Memed Abashidze. The figure wears a medallion with what appears to be the symbol of the Revival party: a spread winged eagle, standing with its legs

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See for example: Alexander Grigolia, "Custom and Justice in the Caucasus: The Georgian Highlanders," (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1939), pp. 19 - 52

³¹ "There could be no denying that here the two religions thrived side by side, with Christian gods doubling as their pagan predecessors. St George also spoke for the Moon God; St Barbara the sun god Lile; and the archangels, the protective spirits of the mountains." Peter Nesmyth, *Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 160. Yet in the same chapter the author notes that "Svaneti possessed more [Christian] icons than any other part of Georgia. (p. 149).

slightly apart, so that its legs and body together form the letter “A”. Leaning against the front of the statue is a bouquet of fresh flowers.

The importance of the myth of Memed Abashidze can be grasped from such public monuments, or by opening a campaign brochure of the Revival party. On the first page, under the head “Aslan Abashidze,” the very first two sentences read: “Born in 1938 in Batumi, into the famous Abashidze family. Grandson of the government and society figure Memed Abashidze, who in 1919 -1921 was the Chairman of the first parliament of Ajaria and who played a deciding role in the reunification of Ajaria with the Georgian Motherland.”³² Other Abashidze’s were both prominent both during the Tsarist and Menshevik periods and were of the same Georgian patriotic stripe as Memed, thus making them politically useful historical footnotes for propaganda purposes. Memed’s father Ibrahim founded the first Georgian-language school in Ajaria in 1881.³³ The school not only taught young Ajarians in the language of the Motherland (as opposed to Russian or Turkish) but was also notable for being coeducational. Memed’s brother, also named Aslan, was a general in the army of Menshevik Georgia. Yet these are comparatively lesser figures in the pantheon, and they are promoted to a correspondingly lesser extent.

It would have been difficult for Aslan Abashidze to pick a better ancestor than his grandfather Memed. Free from tarnish through association with the Turks during the First World War, Memed Abashidze appears to have been a Georgian patriot and a reformer. At the end of the war, he founded the

³² *Vsyegruzinskii Soyuz Vozrozhdeniya.*

³³ *Vsyegruzinskii Soyuz Vozrozhdeniya*

“Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia”, which sought to create an autonomous Ajaria within independent Georgia. After the Bolsheviks overran Georgia in 1921, he was exiled to Baku where he would remain until 1928. After his return from exile, he became president of the local writers union. He was shot in 1937.³⁴

Aslan Abashidze has largely succeeded in making his grandfather, and to a lesser extent his whole family, a symbol of his regime. Accordingly, politicians in Tbilisi trying to woo him, or at least to sooth him, pay tribute to the memory of Memed. In October of 1998, in conjunction with the unveiling of a new statue of Memed Abashidze in Tbilisi, a festival called “Ajarian Days” was organized in the capital. Eduard Shevardnadze spoke of how pleased this made him, and sent greetings on behalf of the whole Georgian people and nation to all of the people living in Ajaria and to its president, Aslan Abashidze. Memed Abashidze, the student and fellow-traveler of Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli, and Grigol Orbeliani he called a national hero.³⁵

The Abashidze family traces its rule in Ajaria to the year 1463. In that year Kahkaber Wardanidze *eristavi* of Guria was ceded the right to rule both Ajaria and Lazistan by Quarqware II, *Atabeg* of Meshkia.³⁶ By the nineteenth

³⁴ David Darchiashvili, *Adzharia – Perekryestok Tsivilizatsii*. Unpublished paper. 1996. (p. 15)

³⁵ “E. Şevardnadze İle Acara Günleri Söyleşisi.” *Çveneburi*, (November – December, 1998). Also see: “Interview with Eduard Shevardnadze,” *Radio Tbilisi* (October 12, 1998). In FBIS-SOV-98-294.

³⁶ W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People*. (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., 1932), p. 137.

century, when Ajaria reappears in the history of the Caucasus as a battleground between the waning Ottoman power and the expanding Russian Empire, the Abashidzes are no longer the most important power in most of the territory, having been eclipsed by the Himshiashvilis.³⁷ Consequently, the Abashidzes do not figure in Western works about Georgia in the nineteenth century. For example, in W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff's classic *Caucasian Battlefields*, no Abashidze is deemed worthy of a mention, though Ahmet Bey Hamşioğlu "who with his brothers ruled all of upland Acaristan" during the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-29 figures prominently in one chapter. Kazemzadeh, in *The Struggle for Transcaucasia*, also neglects to mention a leading role for the Abashidze family. In fact, none of the important western histories of Georgia mention the Abashidzes, with the exception of those new works that mention the current ruler of Ajaria. Partially this is due to the very few studies which have been done on Ajaria and Lazistan, and the short shrift which the region often receives in general works on Georgia. However, it also suggests that, far from ruling all of Ajaria from 1463, the Abashidzes were not always the most powerful family in the area. Perhaps it was partly for this reason that the Abashidze family favored the extension of Russian rule to the territory, while the Hamşioğlus fought vigorously for the status quo.³⁸ Of course, it is an oversimplification to say that either clan wholly took one side or the other. There are examples of Hamşioğlus who fought in Russian uniform and Abashidzes who served as Ottoman officers.

³⁷ Also sometimes spelled Khimshiashvili. In Turkish, it is usually spelled Hamşioğlu. Allen and Muratoff spell it Himşioğlu in *Caucasian Battlefields*.

³⁸ Darchiashvili, p. 10

Besides giving his absolute rule a dynastic legitimization, the Aslan Abashidze uses the family myth as a device to solve the contradiction between the Orthodox Christian nature of Georgian national identity and the Islam of his ancestors. While his Muslim “constituents” may have helped him come to power, it is clear that in order to go further in Georgian politics Aslan Abashidze will have to overcome the anti-Muslim prejudice which runs deep in other regions of Georgia. Even if he intends to go no further, and merely hopes to maintain his position, too much emphasis on Islam might alienate his large Christian constituency in the towns.

Far from concealing his ancestry lest it check his political career, Aslan Abashidze has cast his mythologized nineteenth-century ancestors as the heroes who brought Ajaria back to Georgia, who began to de-Turkify them and return them to their Christian roots. This characterization involves him in no factual contradiction, only in a substantial exaggeration of their importance. The man who rules Ajaria as his private fiefdom is posing as the heir to these champions of Georgian unity.

Clan Abashidze

The extent to which Abashidze’s rule rests on Russian support, or religious factors, or to the historical prominence of his ancestors, can be overstated. As with most political leaders in Georgia, and probably in the Caucasus as a whole, Abashidze’s power is inseparable from the power of his clan. It could be objected that this power is very much connected with his family’s eminence in times past. However, there are plenty of leaders in the Caucasus today who

are not descended from princes, and all of them maintain their grip on power in much the same way.

Concrete information on clan links is hard to come by. There is a great deal of speculation and a great many rumors, some of them colorful, some no doubt accurate, but all difficult to confirm. Still, the notion that Georgia is run by family networks, that important families have members in business, security, and political posts, has wide currency within Georgia, and is corroborated both by government officials and by foreign diplomats who have experience there. As prominent and respected a figure as Zurab Zhvania, Speaker of the Parliament, stated in an interview that “Georgia is a clan-ruled country today.”³⁹

As far as Abashidze’s clan is concerned, the single most sinister example of clan control that people usually mention is the control of the local secret police by Abashidze’s sister-in-law. Abashidze’s people are also supposed to control the Sarpi border crossing between Ajaria and Turkey: according to one unfriendly source, when a relative of Aslan Abashidze’s wife died, the crossing had to be closed – both in order to show respect, and because when all of her relatives had left for the funeral - there weren’t enough people left to run it.⁴⁰ According to other sources, the chief of the Sarpi crossing, a lucrative source of income, both legal and ill gotten, is a relative of Shevardnadze’s.⁴¹ However,

³⁹ “The Whiff of Corruption: Family Clans in the Democratic Process.” *Georgia Profile* (June 1997) Vol. 2, No. 2.. p. 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴¹ This story was confirmed in a personal conversation with high-ranking diplomats who had been posted to Georgia and had spent time in Ajaria.

another story in circulation disputes this, though the chief of the crossing is undisputedly named Shevardnadze. According to this version, Abashidze's men picked up an unemployed man who just happened to share Shevardnadze's last name, but was no relation to him, off the streets of Tbilisi. They offered this man a job at the border crossing, which needless to say he accepted. Once the man had been ensconced in his position, Aslan Abashidze announced to the press that, contrary to reports that his people controlled Sarpi, it was in fact under the control of the Shevardnadze clan. None of these stories can be confirmed.

Inside Ajaria, Abashidze's relatives have positions of influence in the republic's leading enterprises, many of which carry the same name as Abashidze's party – "Revival" (*Agordzineba*). Abashidze's son is in charge of one of these enterprises, Agordzineba-M, which makes plastic articles. Other enterprises of the same name make products ranging from high-speed boats to packaged juice.⁴² Aslan Abashidze, or his family, is also involved in a furniture making enterprise, which explains why furniture has been his gift of choice for Russian officers serving with border troops in Ajaria.

Ajaria vs. Tbilisi -The Russian Border Troops Issue:

Speaking of Russian interests, policies, or even actions in the Caucasus gives the false impression of a unitary state actor capable of rational choice and long-term planning. This sort of anthropomorphism, characteristic of "realist" international relations theory, sometimes looks overstated even when applied to

⁴² *Georgia: Adjarian Autonomous Republic.*

the most advanced democratic states, where examples of different ministries or agencies pulling in opposite directions are not hard to find. At best, we can say that when a state is functioning well on a certain matter of policy, everyone seems to be reading from the same page. When this assumption is applied to a state like Russia - which since *perestroika* has been undergoing a process of dissolution – it is such a loose fit that it is bound to lead the observer astray. While the most recent crisis in Dagestan has also been greeted with conspiracy theories, the muddled Russian response to the revolt has probably convinced most rational observers that the Russian government can hardly even react to events anymore, much less control them from behind the scenes.

Russian policy towards the Caucasus has been shaped by many competing and conflicting sectors of the Russian state and society. It has been both driven by the instability in the region, at the same time as its policies have been among the major causes of that instability. Often, different policy making centers within the Russian state - such as the Foreign Ministry, the military, the President, the oil interests - have pursued such apparently contradictory policies that it is difficult to imagine that they have been in much contact with one another. Also, as in more developed democracies, it sometimes appears that foreign policy is driven by a desire to score points with voters, or to co-opt an issue from political opponents.⁴³

If we accept the idea that there is no single Russian actor in the Caucasus, then questions about Russia's goals or policies can be more realistically analyzed in

⁴³ See: Pavel Baev, *Russia's Policies in the Caucasus* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997).

terms of the goals they satisfy for a much wider variety of actors. In the case of Russian policy towards Georgia, both states are so fragmented that the most fruitful level of analysis, in many cases, turns out to be that of the individual. It sometimes appears that even individuals removed from the very highest levels of government are in a position to shape policy in their own interests, without much interference from above. The Russian state is in fact so disjointed, that after one has observed it for some time, the proposition that there exists an overall coordinated strategy for the domination of the Caucasus, or anywhere else, seems almost like a conspiracy theory. The difference is that while conspiracy theorists imagine that powerful, though seemingly unconnected groups and agencies are working together behind the scenes to control the flow of events, in this case rational western analysts who have grown up in functional states often assume that different Russian ministries and agencies which *should* be coordinating policy with one another actually are. The idea that Russian governmental agencies are actually working with each other, hoping to coordinate their actions in such a way as to reach a mutually hoped for domination of the region is beginning to look as unlikely as the Young Turks being a front for the Jewish – Masonic conspiracy.

That the government of Aslan Abashidze and the commanders of the Russian military forces stationed in Ajaria clearly perceive some common interests is not a matter of controversy. Both Abashidze himself and commanders of the some 5000 Russian Federation forces stationed in Ajaria have commented on their mutually supportive relationship, and Russian journalists have noted with favor the contrast to the way their troops were treated elsewhere in Georgia.

Speculation is rife, however, as to the exact nature of the Faustian bargain that Abashidze is thought to have made with what many Georgians see as an occupying force. The explanations most in favor, as alluded to above, usually have to do with Russia's plans to reabsorb the Near Abroad, using divide-and-rule tactics. There are certainly those in Moscow who would like to see either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union restored in some form. It does not necessarily follow, however, that actions in the Caucasus which push events towards a conclusion that these people might favor, are necessarily planned and directed by these people. In each case, there may be extremely prosaic concerns of the type which were always more dominant in the old USSR than westerners could have imagined - the need to eat well, the desire for a decent car, for an apartment, for other trappings of middle class life - that are actually influencing the unfolding of events. Perhaps surprisingly, these factors have become even more important in the post Soviet environment.

Far from being a puppet of Moscow, Aslan Abashidze is the puppeteer. He and the local Russian military leaders exercise almost unlimited power in Ajaria. The only condition on their power is that they make no statements (though they may take actions) which directly confirm the extent to which their respective Centers have lost their grip. Abashidze's freedom, in fact, goes further: he has been able to make statements which directly confront Tbilisi, knowing full well that Shevardnadze has only two choices: either to play the statements down or admit publicly that Georgia does not, de facto, rule in Ajaria, and has no more immediate prospect of getting it back than it does with Abkhazia.

In many interviews with the Russian media, Abashidze has repeated that the Russian military presence is the force which maintains stability in the region. “[W]e are closely linked with Russia not only economically but also historically and spiritually. We have common geopolitical interests. I make no secret of the fact that the Russian troops in Ajaria are the guarantee of peace and tranquillity for the republic.”⁴⁴ Both he and the Russian media have repeatedly pointed out that Ajaria escaped the turmoil of 1991 – 1994 in the rest of Georgia and that it was undoubtedly the presence of Russian troops, who kept both armed bands like the “Mkhedrioni” and units of the regular Georgian Army out of the Republic. While the rest of Georgia underwent a period of anarchy and painful transition to at least a semi-democracy and free markets, Ajaria remained under the familiar and soothing control of the heirs to the Red Army and the local nomenclatura.

The Russian Army is in a process of decline that began probably before the dissolution of the Red Army. The process has continued, but there are obvious reasons for Moscow to understate the problem. In Abkhazia, and Nagorno Karabakh, a lack of pay and appalling living conditions led to actions that conspiracy-minded Caucasians and overly rational westerners interpreted as part of Russia’s grand plan for reconquest. In Abkhazia, Russian fighter-bombers flew sorties against Georgian positions. When one of these was shot down and its pilot captured, it was presented as evidence of Russian divide-and-rule tactics. It now appears that the real reason for the raids is that the

⁴⁴ Alexandr Kondrashov, “Aslan Abashidze: Our Friendship is Like a River. On the Question of the ‘Hand of Moscow’ in Ajaria,” *Trud* (21 January, 1997) An interview with Aslan

Abkhaz militia, who surrounded the base, simply paid the pilots to fly missions for them⁴⁵

In Ajaria, the conditions that the Russian military found itself in was an opportunity for Abashidze. Taking advantage of his control over nearly all of the Republic's resources, including the opportunity to "tax" all traffic passing through Batumi on its way to and from Turkey, Abashidze was able to provide what Moscow was unwilling or unable to give. In this interview with *Trud* correspondent Alexandr Kondrashov, he noted some of the goods and services he had been able to contribute:

[Kondrashov] What form specifically is this help taking?

[Abashidze] You have already visited the seaport. Have you seen the barracks and staff complex that we recently built for a separate division of border guard ships? I personally oversaw its construction and equipment. I was told by Russian admirals that there is nothing else like it on the Black Sea. A new border customs center was rapidly erected on the Turkish- Georgian border. In the last year alone the Russian military have been given a military hospital complex and a staff building for a military hardware storage depot, and several border outposts have been repaired. Russian border guards have been given two high-speed patrol boats made at the Batumi shipyard. A new Niva jeep has been bought for the division's command. Its headquarters has been supplied with office equipment and furniture for seamen....

[Kondrashov] Aslan Ibraimovich, is it true that you have given every Russian border guard officer serving in Ajaria a suite of furniture?

[Abashidze] No, it all happened somewhat differently.... We lack trained personnel, the appropriate special systems, and much else besides. We cannot do without Russian officers. But how are we to keep them? I decided to start small. I telephoned the director of a furniture factory. I explained the situation to

Abashidze. In FBIS-SOV-97-015.

⁴⁵ Baev, p. 45.

him and asked him to sell the military suites at cost price, half or one-third the price that they are in the stores. The wives of Russian soldiers came along and bought up virtually everything. People's mood has improved. They see that they are not being driven out. On the contrary, people are concerned for them. They arranged their furniture and unpacked their bags. Then we gave homeless military people around 30 apartments. Needless to say, that does not seem a lot. But nothing was being built at the time. We gave the last reserves to our defenders. And people appreciated that. Other Russians besides the military stayed in Batumi. Moreover, according to official figures, over 6,000 people have moved to our republic and settled here recently from various parts of the former USSR. Representatives of over 80 nationalities live in Ajaria in peace and friendship. Even blacks have lived here for over 200 years.⁴⁶

It is not hard to imagine how such generosity could have endeared Abashidze to the Russian commanders. Besides providing direct material aid to hard pressed soldiers, Abashidze has skillfully fostered an atmosphere in which Russians and other non-Georgians feel protected from the currents of Georgian nationalism that have swept other parts of the country. Abashidze's rhetoric recalls the Russian "older brother" ideal of the Soviet era, in which the Russian nation would guide and protect its smaller sibling nationalities. Concretely, the Ajarian government has kept the republic a bilingual zone in a sea of Georgian monolingualism. In terms of official signage, radio and television coverage and print journalism, and even theater productions, Batumi has maintained Russian along with Georgian, while the central government has tried more and more to do away with it. Due to the broadcasts of a government-owned affiliate of CTR (Ostankino) it is easier to get a good Russian TV signal than a Georgian one. The inevitable Russian – Ajarian "Friendship" society has also

⁴⁶ Alexandr Kondrashov, "Our Friendship is Like a River".

been established to promote culture in Russian.⁴⁷ This program for fostering the Russian language is part of a program by the Republican government to orient their citizens, including Ajarians, towards Moscow rather than towards Tbilisi⁴⁸. Abashidze is in this way attempting to reduce his people's exposure to the negative coverage that he receives in the central press. Abashidze's constant refrain, that Russians are welcome and valued in Batumi, no doubt helps non-Georgians to feel safe in the Republic. It is not hard to imagine that, if they were ever called home by Moscow, "[M]any officers would prefer to switch to service with the endearing master of the mandarin groves."⁴⁹

Though this Russophile attitude benefits all Russian-speakers, the position of civilians is more precarious than that of the soldiers, despite Abashidze's comforting words. The main problem is pensions. The Russian government tried to get the Republic to pay the pensions of Russians living in Batumi, but the Republican government refused. Many of these Russians have left⁵⁰.

In addition to the "gifts" to Russian servicemen, it is quite likely that the Russian border units, things being the way they are in the former USSR, are entitled to a certain cut of the proceeds from the Sarpi border gate. Indeed,

⁴⁷ Olga Koroleva. "Adjarskii Bloknot: Respublika gdye ne boyatsya ruskikh tankov." *Pravda* (January 1998), p. 4. There are many other examples of pro-Abashidze stories in this vein in the leftist Russian press.

⁴⁸ Interview with Temaz Baguridze, head of the Ajaria News Agency, Batumi, November 1998. Mr. Baguridze also said that the Russian language and cultural orientation was meant to counteract Turkish influence.

⁴⁹ Liana Minasyan: "Will General Rokhlin Pull Russia's Bases Out of the Transcaucasus?" *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (12 February 1997), No. 6, p. 7. In FBIS-SOV-97-041.

⁵⁰ Interview with Tefik Okyayuz, former Turkish ambassador to Georgia.

they may take quite a large share, since the Republican government is able to tax trucks transiting Ajaria again when they reach Batumi.⁵¹

In addition to providing for the material needs of the troops, the Ajarian government provides something significantly more important: the troops themselves. This arrangement, a convenience that has been remarked upon only briefly by most observers, may contain the seeds of truly calamitous instability, not only for Georgia, but also for the whole Caucasus and, perhaps, many other areas of the former USSR. For in Ajaria, as well as in Armenia and North Ossetia, the Russian Army has turned to local conscripts to fill out its ranks, thinned by peacekeeping duties in the north Caucasus, as well as by draft dodging, and desertion. In Ajaria, as perhaps in these other regions, this practice raises the question of whether these Russian troops may be more loyal to local masters than their Russian leaders. In Ajaria, the answer to that question appears to be yes. Nothing less would explain why Abashidze has clung so fiercely to his local levies; apparently less concerned by whether their nominal masters are in Moscow or Tbilisi.⁵²

Georgia has increasingly asserted its right to control its own borders since the mid 1990's. In the last several years substantial progress has been made, and agreement has been reached that Georgia will take full control of its borders by

⁵¹ According to a Turkish source, the fee collected in the name of the Ajarian government at a checkpoint in Batumi, was U.S. \$160 per truck. According to one 1995 source, border trade through Sarpi amounts to 60 – 70 million US dollars per month. Derluguian, p. 241.

⁵² According to Abashidze: "Russian troops in Ajaria are our troops. For instance, 95 percent of the soldiers in the Russian Federal Border Service's Khichaurskiy Border Detachment are locals. And the figure is 60 in the Batumi Detachment. Eighty percent of the servicemen at the 12th Russian military base, which was formed from the 68th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, are natives of Batumi. Incidentally, Russian Army Lieutenant Colonel Vazha Nadibaidze, the

the end of 1999⁵³. At the beginning of this year, the last Russian border troops were withdrawn from Javakheti and transferred to Ajaria, leaving Ajaria as the last undisputed part of Georgia with Russian border troops. It now appears inevitable that they too will at last be withdrawn.

Aslan Abashidze has been planning for such a rainy day, and as usual, the Tbilisi government is attempting to give him his way without appearing to compromise on principle. In 1998 Valery Chkeidze, the head of the Georgian State Department of Frontier Defense met with Abashidze in Batumi:

“Aslan Abashidze and I met, and agreement has been reached. When Georgia's border guards assume control of the sea and land sections of Ajaria, the emphasis will be put on the local population. Many Ajaris have served in Russia's border troops and, what is more, they are very familiar with the particular features of the terrain, the mountain relief there is truly complicated.”⁵⁴

This would suggest that Tbilisi is caving in to Abashidze's demand for the borders of Ajaria to be defended by Ajarians. His desire for these local troops should be transparent: it is certainly because he is sure such troops will continue to be faithful to him rather than the center. He has gone so far as to threaten to create his own unit of border guards from reservists who have served with the Russians. From Valery Chkeidze's statement above, it could

son of the Georgian defense minister, recently served there.” Alexandr Kondrashov, “Our Friendship is Like a River”.

⁵³ Most recently, the head of Georgia's border guard service, Lieutenant-General Valerii Chkhaidze and Russian deputy border guard commander Aleksandr Manilov, met on 13 August in Tbilisi, where they agreed on a deadline of 1 November for the completion of the withdrawal of all Russian border troops from all parts of Georgia, including Ajaria and Abkhazia. “Deadline Set For Russian Border Guards To Leave Georgia” *RFE/RL Newslines*, (16 August, 1999).

⁵⁴ “Georgia Has Decided To Make Russian Border Guards' Life Easier” by Vera Tsereteli, *Obshchaya Gazeta*. (25 June - 1 July 1998) No 25 p 5. In: FBIS-SOV-98-189.

be implied that he will be allowed to do so under the cover of the Department of Frontier Defense. However, other statements made by Mr. Chkeidze were nuanced slightly differently:

[Meskhishvili] But I had the impression that Aslan Abashidze's view of the situation coincided with yours—in particular, the establishment of border settlements, use of local residents to bring border units up to strength...

[Chkheidze] Let me clarify by stating that our proposal proceeds from the roots that were formed back in 1993, when we were just studying the question of how exactly to safeguard the border. The main function of inhabitants of the mountainous regions was border protection. I am referring to the Svans, Tushintsy, other people who reside in the mountainous regions of Ajaria. Now when they started to lose these functions, the demographic situation collapsed, a stratification of society began... So in Svanetia we took advantage of local inhabitants to bring border forces up to strength. But this does not mean that we have the Svanetian Border Forces. It is the Border Forces of Georgia! And they are deployed along the entire perimeter of our country's border. Protection of the state border is the prerogative of the central authority. If the local authority is willing to actively assist us here--they are due a tremendous expression of thanks. I know that Mr. Abashidze has such intentions. In a conversation I had with him last winter he said: "I will exert every effort to assist the border forces of Georgia."⁵⁵

This would seem to imply that Abashidze would not be allowed to keep his local conscripts at home, which would of course leave them without value. The more pro-Abashidze statement by Mr. Chkeidze came after the two of them had met, so one possible interpretation is that he had come around to the Ajarian leader's way of seeing things. It is more likely that the government in Tbilisi figures it costs nothing to keep Aslan happy for now. It is unlikely, however, that the central government will accede to Mr. Abashidze's wishes

⁵⁵ "Protection of the State Border--The Prerogative of the Central Authority": Interview with Major General Valeriy Chkheidze, chairman of the Georgian State Department for Protection

without more of a fight, for allowing Ajarian conscripts to serve only in Ajaria would cement his grip on power, and only force would then be likely to break it.

It is unclear what force would be available to the Georgian government in the event that they were to try to use it against Abashidze. There are currently about 1,000 Georgian troops in Ajaria, belonging to a mechanized brigade. As well as their small numbers, which would in any case reduce their effectiveness as a counterweight to the Russian presence, the troops' loyalty to Tbilisi is questionable. They are also considered to be less well trained and fed than the Russian troops. These Georgian troops are widely considered to be loyal to Abashidze, quite possibly because their leaders have received the same treatment as those of the Russians. They might be a factor if the Russian Border troops ever really leave Ajaria. The latest agreement envisions having them out by November. Whether this will be a withdrawal in name only remains to be seen.

Javakheti - Parallels and Contrasts:

Other stories of Russian units in the Caucasus selling equipment to rebels are well known. One tale, which once looked apocryphal, but is now accepted as most likely being true, is that Russian troops in South Ossetia rented tanks, by the day or by the hour, to both the Ossets and the Georgians during the insurrection there. And if the mercenary activities seem to have halted in Ossetia for now, the arms bazaar continues in Georgia today: in Javakheti, the

of the State Border, by Mikhail Meskhishvili, *Svobodnaya Gruzija*, (August. 30, 1998), p.2, in FBIS-SOV-98-267.

Armenian-dominated region of Georgia which borders Ajaria to the east, the local Russian base is referred to as “the supermarket.” Much as in Ajaria, “the real authority is exercised by the commanding officers of the Russian air base at Akhalkalaki...”⁵⁶ The difference being, perhaps, that in Javakheti there is no public figure of the stature of Aslan Abashidze to share the power, though the local Armenian separatist rebels are in contact with the “Lion of Ajaria.”

The situation in Javakheti is perhaps even more potentially dangerous, and certainly more unstable, than in Ajaria. In this ethnically Armenian area, which borders on Armenia itself, a genuine popularly based movement for succession seems to have taken hold. In contrast to the situation in Ajaria, the Armenians of the region are widely reported to favor unity with their ethnic cousins across the border; this ethnic consciousness and mobilization being so far absent among the Muslim Ajarians. Also, while Abashidze has Ajaria’s status as an Autonomous Republic as a legal nicety to hide behind, Javakheti does not, and thus provides no way for the Tbilisi government to save face over its loss of control. While these differences between the two regions are important and even striking, especially the contrast between the levels of ethnic consciousness among the two populations, there are nonetheless important parallels between the two situations. Moreover, beyond the parallels, there are the insinuations that Abashidze, in league with Russia, is supporting and encouraging the separatist movement to his east.

Abashidze vs. the Center:

⁵⁶ Charles van der Leeuw, “Georgia’s Troubled Corners – Javakheti: Karabakh Revisited.” *The Azeri Times*, No. 19, March 1999.

Throughout his tenure as the ruler of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze has played a strange, sometimes incomprehensible game of political maneuver with the central Georgian government. Observers differ as to whether this game has been cleverly played, thereby allowing him to hold on to power despite being surrounded by much stronger players, or whether he has survived by dint of the strength of his Russian allies and the comparative weakness of Tbilisi. The true test of Abashidze's political skills is likely yet to come: in a few months, the Russian border troops in Ajaria may officially be gone, and it is not yet clear how strong or loyal to Abashidze the remaining force will be. Whether he will manage to survive without direct Russian support remains to be seen.

Aslan Abashidze's jousts with the Tbilisi government, while no doubt important, are perhaps over-reported in the press, both foreign and domestic (if any news about Ajaria could be said to be "over-reported"). Many observers of Georgia know Abashidze simply as the author of rash, sometimes irrational statements, such as his well known charge that unspecified assailants tried to assassinate him with a special camera which "gave off electromagnetic rays" which caused him to have a heart attack.⁵⁷

These colorful comments, while perhaps a window on to part of Mr. Abashidze's character, should not be taken too seriously. Certainly, it is a mistake to focus on them to the exclusion of real study of his regime, Ajarian society, and the *realpolitik* of Georgia. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the news published in English about Abashidze, and about Ajaria itself, focuses on

⁵⁷, "Ajarian Leader sees Georgians Behind Death Ray Attack." *RFE/RL Newslines* (5 December, 1997).

statements such as these. While the Ajarian leader does not come across in his statements as a great intellectual - in a nation with more than its fair share of intellectuals in politics - statements such as the one cited above are not fairly representative either. The most interesting information to be gleaned, even from statements like this, is about the power politics of independent Georgia, and Abashidze's place in it. What is relatively clear is that Abashidze has been the target of smear campaigns and attempts to discredit him. And he in turn has attempted to discredit his rivals in Tbilisi

The relationship between Shevardnadze and Abashidze:

The relationship between Shevardnadze and Abashidze has been complex. In 1995 Shevardnadze's "Citizen's Union" formed an alliance with Abashidze and his "Revival" party, with Abashidze endorsing Shevardnadze's candidacy for president. The Revival party won 25 seats in the first round of voting, making it the third largest party in parliament. This alliance was always uneasy, and Abashidze apparently did not feel that it obliged him to say positive things about Shevardnadze or his government. The alliance eventually collapsed altogether in 1998, when Revival deputies pulled out of parliament, when it became clear that the Citizen's Union would not be keeping its part of what must have been the bargain – that Revival would support all of the Citizen's Union's plans on the national level, while Abashidze and the rest of the leaders of Revival would be able to keep a large portion of the revenue generated by trade through Batumi and Sarpi in the republic. Soon after, Abashidze announced that he would be forming an alliance with Communist Party of Georgia. This alliance has been just as uneasy as the alliance with

Shevardnadze, and it has not lead to any great changes in policy. Indeed Revival does not seem to have any real ideology; it is focused entirely on keeping much of the money that flows into Ajaria's ports of entry from flowing out again to Tbilisi. The only other obvious difference between the political stance of Revival and the Citizen's Union, comes from Abashidze's more pro-Russian stance.

Abashidze has, for the most part, saved his most serious attacks for other members of the Tbilisi government and the ruling party. It is fair to say that his archenemy has become Zurab Zhvania, the popular speaker of the Georgian parliament. On 19 October, 1997, Tamaz Kharazi, the former mayor of Batumi and a member of Abashidze's party, accused Mr. Zhvania of seeking his help in ousting the Ajarian leader. Mr. Zhvania denied this, and threatened Kharazi with legal action.⁵⁸ Two days after the initial accusation was made, Jemal Gogitidze, chairman of the Revival party in parliament, corroborated Kharazi's story, saying that the speaker had also approached him to secure his support for the plot. These attacks were widely assumed to have been made on Aslan Abashidze's behalf. Whether they are true or not cannot be independently confirmed. Mr. Zhvania's reputation as the cleanest man in Georgian politics has, however, made him a difficult target.

It may be that Abashidze has targeted Zhvania for sound political reasons. Eduard Shevardnadze is now in his seventies, and many in Georgia have begun to wonder who might succeed him. The two names that most frequently

⁵⁸, "Georgian Parliament Speaker Denies Anti-Adjar Plot." *RFE/RL Newsline* (21 October, 1997).

emerge, though from very different camps, are those of Zhvania and Abashidze.

The “Free Economic Zone:”

In the early 1990's, Abashidze and his followers in Ajaria could take political and military autonomy from the central government for granted. So fragmented was Georgia at the time of the struggle with Abkhazia and the civil war between supporters and opponents of Gamsakhurdia, that the central government had no way of checking the powers of Ajarian autonomy. Economic power was another matter. While the profits from the suitcase trade across the Turkish border flowed into the republic's coffers and Abashidze's pockets (which may be the same thing) real wealth required more serious commerce. In 1994, Abashidze began to push for a free economic zone that would attract investment to the area. In November, he won Shevardnadze's approval for the project, which he predicted would bring more than 1 billion dollars of investment to Ajaria in 1995.⁵⁹

Despite Shevardnadze's supposed approval of the project, the parliament dragged consideration of the project out for two years before finally dropping it.⁶⁰ Quite probably, the parliament, controlled by Shevardnadze's "Union of the Citizens of Georgia" party wanted to deny Abashidze the extra economic power that would result from a free economic zone in Batumi. They no doubt understood that little of the money would flow towards Tbilisi.

⁵⁹ "Shevardnadze Endorses Free Economic Zone in Adzharia." *RFE/RL Newsline*, (28 November, 1994).

⁶⁰ Irina Dzhorbenadze, "Georgia: Free Economic Zones--Obvious Merits and Improbable Shortcomings" *Delovoy Mir* (26 December 1996), p 2. In FBIS-SOV-97-016.

In April 1998, Aslan Abashidze's Revival Party pulled out of parliament. One of the reasons given for the parliamentary boycott, which is ongoing, was the failure of that body to pass the necessary legislation to create the free economic zone.

Plots and Intrigue:

Politics in the Caucasus in the post-Soviet era have often been marked by violence. Comments that would have to be dismissed as paranoia in more peaceful states often have some basis in fact in Georgia. For reasons of personal security, Aslan Abashidze has not visited Tbilisi since the fall of Gamsakhurdia. For some, this has made him an object of ridicule, but his claim that there are some in the central government who might be willing to end his tenure by other than democratic means cannot be dismissed.

Whether or not he has been targeted for execution by forces connected to the central government is debatable. He has been attacked.⁶¹ Other attacks have apparently been planned; in 1998 during the trial of 15 members of Gamsakhurdia's *Mkhedrioni* militia, former Deputy Interior Minister Temuri Khachishvili claimed that former National Security Minister Shota Kviraia and Prosecutor-General Djamlet Babilashvili had asked him to kill Abashidze.⁶²

⁶¹ An attack on his motorcade was foiled in November, 1995. *RFE/RL Newslines*, (1 November, 1995).

⁶² "Mkhedrioni Trial Continues," *RFE/RL Newslines*, (22 January, 1998).

more recently, Abashidze has accused the Interior Ministry of plotting his assassination.⁶³ Whether this accusation has any basis in fact is unclear.

⁶³ "Is Adjara Leader In Danger of Being Killed?" *RFE/RL Newsline* (8 March, 1999).

CHAPTER III

AJARIAN IDENTITY

Introduction:

An investigation into the identity of the Ajarians has to answer two distinct kinds of questions: first, what are the objective facts concerning their ancestry and, second and most importantly, who do the Ajarians themselves think they are. Both types of question are difficult to answer. While historians have dealt with the issue of objective origins in a general way for the whole of historical Georgia, there has been no serious study of Ajaria in particular. As for the opinions of Ajarians, there has been only one serious work by the anthropologist Paul Magnarella, which deals with the identity of Turkish Ajarians, among other concerns. No corresponding work has been done on the Georgian side of the border.

In fact it is necessary not only to ask who both Turkish and Georgian Ajarians *think* they are - expecting the answer to be different on both sides of the border - but also to ask who the Ajarians *thought* they were; before the intervention of powerful ideologies and state institutions in both Republican Turkey and Soviet Georgia. For it is clear that Ajarians, like other peoples living in the marches between the former Turkish and Russian empires, have been subjected to propaganda and coercion, which must certainly have affected their self-identity. At this late date, it may be impossible to answer this question definitively. Ajaria was a rural backwater for both the Russian and Ottoman empires. With the exception of Batumi itself, it was very infrequently visited,

and no nineteenth century outside observer though the area worth devoting much study to. This is in marked contrast to the Abkhaz and the Armenians, who both captured the imagination and attention of Europeans in the nineteenth century, who left behind an invaluable literature of travel writing.

The identity of the Ajarians has been a quiet controversy, which concerns relatively few individuals on either side of the border. Many of the people who do concern themselves with the theme are themselves Ajarians. The topic owes its obscurity to the fact that the last conflict on the border between Turkey and Georgia ended with the end of the Turkish War of Independence. Having been settled by the treaty of Kars, the border has not in the meantime been challenged by irredentists on either side. Ajaria has also not produced any serious separatist movements on either side of the border.

Perhaps another reason for the obscurity of the Ajarians and the debate about their identity stems from the fact that there are very few people who have written about them who have identified them as a separate ethnic group, much less as a nation. In the days of Gamsakhurdia's presidency, there were a few westerners who did so, though this aroused the ire of the Georgian government, which has always insisted that there is no such thing as an Ajarian "ethnic group." In Turkey also, the debate has generally been about whether Ajarians are ethnically Georgians or Turks, and seldom has it been openly suggested that they might be a distinct ethnic group of their own. If they were to be so identified, by either politicians or academics, they might excite as much interest as the Abkhaz, or at least the Laz.

Ajarian Identity: The Georgian Context:

Any examination of the identity of Ajarians and how it is conceived by Georgians in general must begin with an examination of how Christian Georgians view themselves. The Georgian national identity is unusual in a number of respects. For one thing, there is evidence for the existence of such an identity, of musings on what it means to be Georgian, as far back as the tenth century. Rather than being kinship-based, it has primarily been based on a shared language and Orthodox Christianity. This conception dates back to Georgia's medieval "Golden Age", the only time that the country has been unified and independent for a substantial amount of time. The Georgian linguistic-religious national myth has been complicated by two factors. One, is that certain dialects are so removed from standard Georgian as to be mutually unintelligible and are generally considered to be separate languages by linguists. In pre-Soviet times, this factor was ameliorated by the use of "standard" Georgian for liturgical purposes throughout Georgia. The other involves the conversion to Islam of the Kartvelian speaking peoples who fell under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The contradiction between Islam and the national identity of Christian Georgians has proven harder to eliminate.

"The languages of the Georgian peoples are not part of the Indo-European, Altaic, or Finno-Ugric language families. Rather they belong to the southern Caucasian language group known as Kartvelian ("kartveluri") and have descended from an original, proto-Georgian language that began to break into

several distinct but related languages about four thousand years ago."¹ These languages are Svan ("svanuri") Mingrelian ("megruli"), Laz ("chanuri"), and Georgian ("kartuli"). Many linguists classify Laz and Mingrelian as dialects of the same language; Zan ("zanuri") although the dialects are not always mutually intelligible. Georgian itself is further divided into fourteen dialects.²

This linguistic diversity among Kartvelian languages, to say nothing of non-Kartvelian languages such as Abkhaz and Osetin, complicates the business of grounding national identity in linguistic unity. While all Georgians retain strong associations with their regions, these loyalties are perhaps stronger in places like Mingrelia, where linguistic difference combines with a long history of political independence.³ More problematic are the Laz and the Ajars in Turkey who, while nominally Kartvelian speakers, clearly do not generally consider themselves part of the Georgian nation for religious and historical reasons. Many of the ancestors of today's Laz and Ajaris sided with their religious cousins in Turkey against Christian Georgians and Russians during the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29, the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish war of 1878-79, and the period from the beginning of the First World War to the end of Menshevik Georgia in 1921. Despite this apparent primacy of religion over language in the case of Muslim Kartvelian speakers, a few Georgian writers have used this linguistic (and inferred cultural) affiliation to support irredentist claims. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Georgian

¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.4.

² "Georgia," *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, (internet edition, <http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/countries/Geor.html>, 1996 – 1999).

³ Sergei Panarin, "Political Dynamics of the 'New' East (1985 – 1993)," *Central Asia and Transcaucasia*, ed. Vitaly Naumkin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 80, 92

delegation opposed Greek and Armenian claims to what is now north-eastern Turkey, on the basis of a purported Laz, (and therefore Georgian) majority in what they called "Turkish Georgia." According to Georges Vechapeli: "...the great majority of the population of the territory coveted by the Greeks and the Armenians are composed of Laz, who speak the same language as the Georgians-Mingrelians and who retain all of their typical traits."⁴ Referring to this same unsuccessful claim, a modern Georgian scholar writes: "...the historical territory of Georgia was significantly reduced as the Soviet government gave large parts of the republic's territory to Turkey and Russia. In all, Georgia lost about 20,000 square kilometers..."⁵

As with their neighbors the Armenians, a Christianity constantly under threat from surrounding Muslims is an important part of the Georgian national identity.⁶ Article 9 of Georgia's new constitution, adopted in 1995, recognizes the special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history (while at the same time guaranteeing freedom of religion). It is this emphasis on Orthodoxy and the Georgian language combined that give Georgian nationalism its unusual, archaic character.

In the tenth century, the Georgian scribe Giorgi Merchule wrote: "Georgia is reckoned to consist of those spacious lands in which church services are

⁴ Alexandre Toumarkine, *Les Lazes en Turquie: XIXe – XXe siècles* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1995), p. 60 - 61.

⁵ Nugzar Mgeladze "Ajaria," *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (New York: G. K. Hall & co.), 1994, p. 13.

⁶ Ghia Nodia, "Georgia's Identity Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* (1995) vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 106-107. Even Soviet writers managed to have something good to say about Christianity in Georgia. According to one Soviet Georgian writer, it was only after adopting Christianity as the state religion in the fourth century A.D. that Georgian literature and art began to develop

celebrated and all prayers said in the Georgian tongue.”⁷ This quite early statement of national identity, interweaving the Georgian language and Orthodox Christianity, still grips the minds of Georgian nationalists. Zviad Gamsakurdia wrote an article on John Zosime, a monk and a contemporary of Merchule’s. Quoting from Zosime’s “Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language” he wrote: “The Georgian language (nation) is preserved until the day of the Second Coming to testify to Him, in order that God judge (expose) all the languages through this language. And this language has been dormant to this day, and in the Gospel this language is called Lazarus.”⁸ Echoing and amplifying this idea at the conclusion of the article, Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia, stated: “...that the Georgian nation and its language, adorned and blessed in the name of the Lord, is a Lazarus among the nations and languages, ... which must bear an unprecedented testimony to Christ, will rise in the future, regain its universal position as mankind’s spiritual teacher, and at the Second Coming of Christ will become expositor of sinful humanity.”⁹ Thus for Georgian nationalists like Gamsakhurdia, Georgians are people who belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church, who pray in standard (old) Georgian, or whose ancestors did these things.¹⁰ This last caveat is important, since it reconciles, in the Georgian mind, Muslim minority

⁷ Lang p. 109. Also see Meskhia 1968. p. 11. By Georgian is meant "kartuli," not the other Kartvelian languages.

⁸ Zviad Gamsakhurdia “‘Praise and Glorification of the Georgian Language’ and the Ethnogeny of the Georgians.” from *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia* p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 65.

¹⁰ Interestingly, this form of identity, through a combination of a shared religion and liturgical language has much in common with what Benedict Anderson has described as “classical” pre-national communities, though the communities he has in mind, Christendom, the Chinese Middle Kingdom, the Islamic *Ummah*, were huge universal civilizations. This raises several interesting questions: whether this supposedly pre-modern form of community can continue to exist in the form of modern nation states, and whether other small nations in the pre-modern period were similarly ordered communities. If this were so, it would call into question the assumption of contemporary nationalism theory – that nations such as Georgia grew out of the

groups with the Christian nature of Georgia. These Muslims who speak Georgian have been alienated from half of their identity, and must be restored to spiritual wholeness.

Modern, European-inspired notions of national identity began to take hold among Georgian intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and began to challenge the primacy of regional identities among ordinary people, aided by the processes of urbanization and industrialization.¹¹ The willingness with which Georgians assimilated the new nationalist ideology has been ascribed by Ghia Nodia to their Christianity, which Georgian intellectuals saw as including them within the family of civilized Western nations.¹² Despite the influx of new ideas, Georgian nationalist writings continued to bear characteristic pre-modern qualities. Then, as now, religion was bound up with language, and despite a somewhat more secular and European tone, the existence of a unifying liturgical language never entirely lost its importance. Accordingly, when some early Georgian nationalists denied that Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz were separate languages, it was for the protection of the liturgical, rather than the spoken Georgian language, as in this example from Tedo Zhordania, giving an account of his meeting with the Exarch in a pamphlet published in 1913: “Don't lose your temper with me and I'll tell the truth to you, you are lovers of the truth, with holy understanding, give me permission, and I am hopeful that I shall entirely convince you that you, the

collapse of such classical communities as the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire and its tributaries.

¹¹ Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1995), p. 78.

¹² Ghia Nodia, “Georgia’s Identity Crisis,” *Journal of Democracy* (January, 1995), vol. 6, no. 1, p. 107.

governing body of schools, are deeply and sadly mistaken or else they are leading you astray when they try to make you believe that Mingrelians do not understand Georgian - Mingrelian is the Old Georgian language.”¹³ The context for this pamphlet was a movement in the beginning of the twentieth century in Mingrelia to change the liturgical language from Georgian to Mingrelian. In an article of 1903, collected and reprinted in 1990, Iak'ob Gogebashvili wrote: “The Mingrelians, who accepted Christianity three centuries earlier than the eastern Georgians, glorified the savior Christ and performed their worship in their fundamental language, Georgian, and this they did entirely through their own volition and at the bidding of their social instinct... From the start they acknowledged the Georgian alphabet to be their own alphabet, and they deemed the Georgian language to be their own literary language, whilst they used their provincial dialect only domestically.”¹⁴

The pre-modern character of Georgian nationalism is especially important in understanding the way in which Ajaria and Ajarians are understood by Christian Georgians. For them, even in the twentieth century, Georgia is still a community bound together by its religion and its liturgical language. This way of seeing things seems to have survived even the Communist era. Thus while it is important for Georgian nationalists to assert that the Ajarians are descended from Christian Georgians, it is not only because they are asserting blood kinship, but also that they were formerly members of a civilization bound together by its sacred language and texts. For many Georgians, the fact that

¹³ George Hewett “Yet a Third Consideration of ‘Völker, Sprachen und Kulturen des Südlichen Kaukasus’,” *Central Asian Survey* (1995), vol. 14, no. 2, p.289.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

Ajarians speak Georgian is not enough to fully include them in that civilization, but only a sign that they once belonged and were then alienated from it.

The Georgian Conception of Ajarian Identity:

What follows is an attempt to portray, based on various Georgian sources and personal conversations, the standard Georgian view of the history of Ajaria. To those who might object that such a standard view is bound to be only a caricature, one might answer that in extremely nationalistic societies, the range of opinion on such subjects is much more circumscribed than is true in modern Western societies. Of course, what follows *is* oversimplified, as indeed it must be, given the difficulties inherent in presenting the views of a group in a coherent manner.

According to certain Georgian writers, following the conquest of southwest Georgia by the Ottoman empire, those Georgians who happened to live in the occupied zone were forcibly converted to Islam. They had the choice of converting or losing the rights to the land that they needed to maintain their standards of living, or simply to subsist. Many Georgians fled the area in order to remain Christian.¹⁵ The remainder became today's Ajarians and Laz, who are simply converted Gurians and Mingrelians. Georgians object to the use of the word "Ajarian" to denote an ethnic group, since, in their view, the term merely refers to a regional affiliation, in just the same way as Kahketian, Imeretian or Gurian refer to individuals from those Georgian provinces.

¹⁵ Mgeladze, p. 14.

Due to the supposedly coerced nature of their conversion, the Ajarians never became fully Islamized. Secretly, they maintained certain Christian rituals and traditions. For example, Ajarians are said to use the sign of the cross on their bread. “Hidden crosses” can be found in the decorative carvings and paintwork on the small, traditional wooden mosques of the area. Bunches of grapes, the symbol of wine, are also used as a decorative motif on mosques and private homes. Beyond this symbolic acceptance of alcohol consumption, Ajarians are said to be quite fond of the real thing, sharing with their Christian cousins a love of homemade wine. In short, due not only to the coercive nature of their conversion, but also because the “Georgian character” is not compatible with Islam, the religion never really took root.¹⁶

The rebellions of the Laz and Ajarian *derebeys* in the early 19th century were interpreted by Soviet Georgian scholars as “wars of liberation” or struggles against Ottoman occupation. Naturally, these struggles increased in intensity in the nineteenth century, due to the influence of the “great friendship” between the Georgian and Russian peoples which was symbolized by the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783.¹⁷

¹⁶ See chapter II above, for an assessment of these arguments.

¹⁷ *Adjaria*, (Moscow: Planeta Press, 1986), p. 40. The authors of this Soviet-style coffee table book, also suggest that the Ajarians fought against Ottoman rule during the 1828 - 1829 Russo-Turkish war and the Crimean war. No doubt they would not agree with the opinion, expressed by a Russian statesman, that: “the simple protectorate which Russian granted Georgia in 1783 had dragged this unfortunate land into an abyss of misfortune which led to its complete exhaustion.” Lang, cited in Suny, p. 50. The new Ajarian government has the same official view of events: “The great threat rose over the population of Adjaria, but it never lost courage and never obeyed the foreign yoke. This is confirmed by the revolts of Adjarians in the years 1680, 1685, 1697, 1737, 1774, 1810-15, [and] 1875 for the liberation of [their] homeland and [the] preservation of [their] language and culture. See “Georgia: Adjarian Autonomous Republic” an unpublished PR booklet produced by the Ajaria News Agency (1998), p. 11.

After the region was “liberated” by Russian and Georgian troops in 1878, the population of Ajaria was gradually re-educated about its Georgianness. For while Islam and Turkish culture had never fully taken root, the Ajarians were at a lower educational and cultural level than their Christian counterparts, and were not fully aware of their own history. According to official histories, Turkish agents spread alarming disinformation about the Russian forces and many thousands of frightened Ajarians fled to Turkey rather than face the oppression they were sure would come.¹⁸ Thus, a period of consciousness raising was necessary. This was undertaken by progressive forces within Ajaria, most notably the Abashidze family, who, along with other enlightened nobles, opened Georgian-language schools.

Despite some opposition, by the outbreak of the First World War, Ajarians were starting to reintegrate with Georgian society. According to the official Ajarian histories now being written in Batumi, evidence for this can be found in the popularity of Memed Abashidze’s “Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia”, and in the fact that supposedly, Ajarians did not fight against Russia in significant numbers. It was due to this fact that they were not deported from their region, as the Tsarist government had originally intended to do. The intercession of Georgian notables on the behalf of the Ajarians convinced the Tsarist authorities that only a handful of malcontents were responsible for the sabotage and guerilla activity which did take place in the region.

¹⁸ See for example: A. S. Bendianishvili, “Rusko-Turetzkaya Voina 1877 – 1878 I. Gruzia” *Ocherki Istorii Gruzii* (Tbilisi: Metzniyereba, 1990), p. 331.

In 1918, after the Turks occupied Batumi, the Turkish government attempted to enlist world public opinion, on behalf of their continued occupation and re-annexation of Ajaria to Turkey. Accordingly, they staged a “plebiscite”, in which a majority voted in favor of joining Turkey. The plebiscite was, however, rigged in favor of the Turkophiles¹⁹. Voters cast ballots in two separate boxes, one white, for union with Turkey, and one Green, for union with Georgia. It was not a secret ballot. The Turkish governor of Batumi and religious leaders preached for union with Turkey, saying “Whoever casts his vote in the green box is condemning the Muslims.”²⁰ Following the vote, the Ottoman government annexed the whole of Ajaria, only to lose it again when the fortunes of war in Europe shifted and the British replaced the Germans as the power in the Caucasus.

Despite the supposed desire of Ajarians and even Laz to remain a part of Georgia, much traditionally Georgian land returned to Turkish control. The young Soviet Union needed Kemalist Turkey, its de-facto ally and the only country which recognized the new government, and was thus compelled to compromise on border issues.

In Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia, Muslim Georgians have been re-integrated into Georgian society. Islam is now said to be a concern only of the very old, in small villages. According to one Georgian academic, they cling to it more

¹⁹ Apparently, the plebiscite was rigged. See Chapter I above.

²⁰ Temuraz Komakhidze, *Sin Otechestva*, (Batumi: 1994) p. 155.

for the **prestige and power** that the religion gives to the elderly than out of any religious conviction²¹

Turkish Ajarian Views of Ajarian Identity – Theses of Turkish Ancestry:

While the dissemination of Turkophile ideas in Georgian Ajaria ended with the Soviet conquest, they influenced the official ideology of Turkey. These views may also have influenced some Ajarians in Turkey, though it is unclear what percentage of the population believe that they share their ancestors with other Turks, rather than with Christian Georgians.

According to publications of the Iznik Batumi Region Cultural Society (İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği) a Turkish Ajarian group with Turkophile ideas, proof of the Turkish origins not only of Ajarians, but of all Caucasians, can be found in the Old Testament and in the Kartlis Chkhovreba (“Life of Kartli” better known as “The Georgian Annals”)²². This native source for the most ancient periods of Georgian history traces the nations of the Black Sea to eight different descendents of Noah’s son Japheth, and his son Targam, ancestor of the Turks. These eight descendents were Hay, Kartl, Bard, Movakan, Her, Eg(e)r, Lek, and Kavkas. Each of these men was the founder of one of the Caucasian nations. For example: Hay, ancestor of the Armenians; Kartl, ancestor of the Georgians; Bard, progenitor of the natives of Karabakh; Lek, after whom the Lezgins are named, and Kavkas, from whom the Circassians are descended. The Ajarians themselves are descended from Eg(e)r: Eger = Ajar. If these ancient religious and historical texts are taken as

²¹ Interview with Mgeladze.

literally true, than all of the peoples of the Caucasus, not only the Ajarians, are ethnic Turks.²³

According to one source, the members of the İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği, do not actually take this theory too seriously, but rather included it in their publication in order to demonstrate that Ajarians are loyal to the Turkish state and its ideology. If this is the case, then it illustrates the dangers inherent in trying to understand ethnic issues in a state where such issues are still highly sensitive. According to this source, while the İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği is certainly pro-Turkish, they think of Ajarians as neither “ethnically” Turkish nor simply “Georgian Muslims.” If this is the case, it is also an illustration of the dangers of writing about such issues for amateur historians – because so much space is given to the above information in their publications, right at the beginning of the articles, that it would be very difficult for an outside observer to discount this as merely a sop to the official ideology.

Other writers have asserted that the Ajarians are descended from Kipchak Turks who settled in the area well after Noah’s grandson had left the scene.²⁴ According to this explanation, the Ajarians are more closely related to the Tatars than they are to the Georgians. This assertion is supported to some extent by Western and Soviet Georgian sources. The Kipchak episode in

²² W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., 1932), p. 313.

²³ *Acaristan Özerk Cumhuriyeti*. (Iznik: İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği, 1997). Much the same information has been published by the same group in an article by the same title in *Nart*, January – February, 1998.

²⁴ Ahmet Gökdemir, *Cenüb-i Garbî Kafkas Hükûmeti* (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 1998) p. IV.

Georgian history is described in some detail in Chapter I, in the “David and Thamar” section. It is very possible that the current residents of the region around Artvin and Ardanuch, as well as those peoples deported from Meskheta by Stalin in 1944, are in part descended from these same warriors who helped resettle those areas of the Georgian kingdom that had been ravaged by war with the Seljuks.

While any discussion of ancient origins, or even medieval settlement, is bound to be contentious, in the nineteenth century the Ajarians showed their ethnic affiliation in the most concrete way possible: by taking sides in war on the side of the Turks against Christian Georgian and Russia.

During World War One, and in the Russo-Turkish wars of the 19th century, the Ottomans relied on irregular troops for their Caucasian campaigns. The most effective of these were the Ajarian and Laz troops raised by the local *derebeys*. Among the most important of these families were the Himshiashvillis, or Hamşioğulları. This leadership continued into the WWI period, when this pro-Turkish family represented the interests and wishes of the majority of Ajarians in a provisional government of southwest Caucasian Muslims.

In 1918, the Turkish army entered Batumi. Ajaria was awarded to Turkey under the terms of the Brest-Litovsk peace agreement between Germany and her allies and Bolshevik Russia. In order to bolster their claims to the region, in an atmosphere conditioned by President Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the right of self-determination, the Turkish government held a plebiscite in Batumi,

and elsewhere in the “Three Sanjaks”, which showed the level of support for reunification with Turkey.²⁵ This government, and the plebiscite, are also discussed in Chapter I, in the “War and Revolution” section.

An Alternative Turkish Ajarian View – *Çveneburi*:

As previously mentioned, no one has ever polled the Ajarian community in Turkey on the subject of their origins, this subject being far too sensitive for the government, despite the total lack of anti-Turkish separatism among the Ajarians of Turkey. We know only that opinion is not monolithic, and that there are Turkish Ajarians who subscribe to a version of the Orthodox (in both senses) Georgian view described above. The most active of these are or have been associated with *Çveneburi*,²⁶ a magazine first published in Stockholm in 1977, moving to Istanbul in 1980. This “cultural magazine” was founded by the late Ahmet Özkan, a Turkish Ajarian from Hayriye village near Inegöl, who took the Georgian surname Melashvili.

The early issues of *Çveneburi* were crudely produced, with most of its material being translated from Soviet Georgian sources. The magazine was not then, nor is it now, overtly political. However, its presentation of cultural issues is provocative, as it almost totally ignores the religious distinction between Ajarians and other Georgians, presenting a picture of a unified Georgian culture in which Christians predominate, but Muslims and Jews are accepted.

²⁵ Kazemzadeh, p. 152. While the Georgian government protested that the polling had been poorly conducted and the results were invalid, the Turkish government responded that many votes had been registered against unification with Turkey, which proved the polls validity.

²⁶ The word *Çveneburi* is a word used by some Ajarians to identify themselves and their dialect of Georgian.

After returning to Turkey, Ahmet Özkan assisted Paul Magnarella in his unique study of Hayriye village, to date the only in depth study of Ajarian life in Turkey. In 1979, Özkan and others who had worked on the Swedish journal began publishing again in Bursa; a move that proved ill timed, to say the least. Özkan's journal, with its obvious connections to the Soviet Union, began publishing in Turkey at the height of tension and violence between leftist and rightist gangs that led to the 1980 coup. On July 5 1980, he was murdered outside of his home²⁷.

The journal was forced to cease publication following the coup, but resumed under the same name in 1993. The new journal, published by a group that included Özkan's son Iberia, Osman Nuri Mercan, and Fahrettin Çiloğlu, was a far cry from the rather dingy publication of the seventies, with a more standard magazine format rather than the folded A4 sized Swedish journal. The production standards have continued to improve, and today's issues have full-color illustrations on the cover, and, while they don't use magazine quality calendared paper, it is of high quality when compared to that used in some similar Turkish diaspora publications.

Despite its new look, and despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, which occurred during the break in publication, the new *Çveneburi* follows roughly the same line as the old; which is to say that the articles usually ignore or at least minimize the role of religion in Ajarian identity. Many articles are still

²⁷ Hasan Tahsin Saygılı (Bejanidze), "Ahmet Özkan (Melaşvili)," *Çveneburi* (January – February, 1993), pp. 4 – 7.

translated from Georgian publications, and the emphasis is on exposing the reader to Georgian culture and language. For the authors, there is no doubt that Ajarians are the descendents of Christian Georgians who were Islamized following the Ottoman conquest. In the new, as in the old magazine, this point is seldom made overtly, but often by omission. The term “Ajarian” is never used - the people of Ajaria are referred to simply as Georgians. Those few articles actually about Ajaria and its people stress their connections to Christian Georgians in culture and history. Their Christian origins are often stressed.²⁸

During the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, the magazine took a pro-Georgian government stand. A relatively mild article by Çiloğlu²⁹ repeated that government’s assertion that the Abkhaz had lived in harmony with the Georgians for centuries, downplaying the need for autonomy, and ignoring the persecution the former suffered under Beria’s regime. More scandalously, the magazine reprinted an article by Mariam Lortkipanidze, in which he asserted that today’s Abkhaz only settled on Georgian territory in the seventeenth century, by which time Kartvelian speakers had been living there for millennia.³⁰ This pro-Georgian position certainly ran counter to the prevailing public opinion in Turkey during the conflict, which was strongly pro-Abkhaz, even though there were actually very few Muslim Abkhaz left in the province.

²⁸ See for example “Yüzyılın Başında Acara” by İakob Gogebashvili, *Çveneburi*, (July – October 1993), pp. 23 - 25. Also see “Tarihi ve Coğrafi Bölgeleriyle Gürcüstan: Acara” by Fahrettin Çiloğlu, *Çveneburi*, (January-February 1995), pp. 16 – 18. The author of this last article claims that Ajaria was the first region of Georgia to accept Christianity, while the process of Islamization lasted from the late 16th through the 18th centuries.

²⁹ Fahrettin Çiloğlu, “Abhazya Sorunu”, *Çveneburi*, (January – February 1993), p. 28.

³⁰ Mariam Lortkipanidze, “Abhazya, Gürcüstan’ın ayrılmaz bir kısmıdır” *Çveneburi*, (March – June 1993), p. 3.

Given the magazine's extremely pro-Georgian profile, some of its detractors in Turkey have suggested that it may be no more than a propaganda organ for the Georgian state, as it had previously been for the Soviet regime. These critics point to the fact that *Çveneburi* has been published more consistently, with the exception of the years when it would have been impossible for political reasons, than is usual for ethnic diaspora journals in Turkey. Despite the fact that it serves an ethnic group which is less active and organized than, say, the Abkhaz community, it is perhaps more professional looking than *Nart*, the Turkish Circassian journal. It is certainly more impressive than the pamphlet produced by the İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği mentioned above. Even more impressive, *Çveneburi* is available at many ordinary newsstands throughout the country, meaning that it is handled by a distributor which deals with more mainstream publications. This service is extremely expensive, in Turkey as elsewhere. Some have suggested that the magazine could not be published to such a high standard and distributed on such a wide scale without monetary support from the Georgian government.

Çveneburi does have advertisers, who must cover some of its operating costs. Prominent among these is the Zaza razor company, whose ads have graced every back cover of the magazine in the 1990's. This company is owned by a Georgian Catholic family that has lived in Turkey since the Russian Revolution.³¹ It is possible, of course, that this and other companies are paying for the entire cost of the publication, because they sympathize with its goals. There may also be private individuals who donate money to make up

³¹ Osman Nuri Mercan, "Türkiye'de ilk modern traş bıçağı fabrikasını biz kurduk." *Çveneburi*, (November – December 1993), p. 14.

the deficit. Even if there is some covert Georgian government financing, something that can by no means be proven, this does not necessarily mean that the group working with the publication is insincere, or that they are Georgian agents. It is however, as stated above, impossible to know for sure to what extent this publication reflects the views of Turkish Ajarians.

Analysis:

No western work of history has ever seriously examined the history of Ajaria, though works on Turkish or Georgian history have dealt with it in passing. The picture that emerges from these works supports some of the claims of both sides. As for the actual origins of the Ajarians, all western works, including travelogues of nineteenth century visitors to the region, works of history and anthropological studies, support the claim that the Ajarians are Georgians who converted to Islam in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet most serious western sources also take note of the settlement of Kipchaks in Georgia, especially in areas like Ajaria where the wars with the Selcuks had taken their greatest toll. Linguistic evidence also points to a common ancestry for Gurians and Ajarians, as both groups speak a dialect of Georgian more closely related to eastern than to western Georgian dialects. This suggests the influence of those Georgians who migrated to the southwest during the Arab invasions of the eastern part of what is now Georgia in the seventh century.

As of yet, there has been no major historical study in a western language of the Kipchak settlements in Georgia during the reign of David *Agmashenebeli*. Certainly, these settlers must have left some mark on Georgian culture,

especially in areas where they were settled in large numbers. Yet they did not create communities which survived into modern times with a Kipchak identity. Travelers coming from Turkey or Muslim areas of Russia in the nineteenth century referred to the inhabitants of the area as Muslim Georgians, due to their mother tongue and their cultural similarities to other Georgians.

Most likely, the Kipchaks disappeared from Ajaria due to their assimilation into Georgian society: “The assimilation of the 220,000 Kipchaks was accomplished rapidly, they were converted to Christianity and provided their adopted country with remarkable men.”³² It should be noted that the assimilation did not need to be exceedingly rapid, as roughly 400 years elapsed between the settlement of the Kipchaks and the Ottoman invasions of Ajaria and Samtskhe. We can assume that descendants of the original Georgian inhabitants of the region also returned during this time, along with other Georgian migrants, and that they must have mixed with the by now Christian Kipchaks. So perhaps we have a paradox, or maybe only an interesting illustration of the slipperiness of notions of “national identity”: the Ajarians probably *are* descended, at least in part, from Turks. After conversion to Christianity, those Turks must have thought of themselves as Georgians, to the extent that they thought of themselves as having a “nationality” at all. After their conversion to Islam following the Ottoman conquest, they would again think of themselves as Turks, though for them “Turk” would have been synonymous with “Muslim.” In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the secularization of religious identities would cause some Ajarians

³² Alexandre Manvelichvili, *Histoire de Géorgie* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions de la Toison d’ Or, 1951), p. 173.

to think of themselves as Turks in the sense of being descended from Turkish tribes, which would lead them to trace their ancestry back to those Kipchaks who had already adopted Georgian identity in the Middle Ages.

It can be said with certainty that there are many Ajarians in Turkey who believe that they are of Turkish decent. No one has ever attempted to determine what percentage of the population believes in a Turkic origin for their group, possibly because such questions of identity are still too sensitive in Turkey. Clearly there are also those who believe otherwise. As for the Ajarians in Georgia, such a survey would be a real test of the tolerance of Aslan Abashidze, whose regime, though possessed of certain positive qualities, is not usually counted among the most sensitive to press or academic freedoms. Indeed, both Turks and Georgians still show great sensitivity to such questions of origins. Despite this, one is tempted to point out that it makes no practical difference at all: for neither objective facts nor beliefs about origins have in any way impacted the loyalty of Ajarians to Turkey.

“Ajarian” Identity:

It is clear that Ajarians, at least until the Soviet period, considered themselves to be "Turks" or "Tatars" in the pre-modern sense of these words. If they felt themselves to be somewhat different from their Turkish-speaking Muslim neighbors, they felt closer to them than to their co-linguists in Georgia. Both "Turk" and "Georgian" were, until very recently, more terms of religion than of kinship. The attempt of the Turkophiles to emphasize a blood connection (the fact that there may be one notwithstanding) is part of the project to

secularize what had until the creation of the Turkish Republic been a religious identity. Because of this religious bond - which was real, not “crypto-Christian” - Ajarians fought on the side of the Turks in every war against Russia. It was also this religious identity which made them leave their “motherland” Ajaria for Turkey. The record of the Ajarians, and the Laz, as irregular troops in the Turkish army is clear. In fact, the military role that the Ajarians have played is the only role important enough to have been noticed by Western scholars. The Western history of Ajaria is almost exclusively a military one. We can also assume, however, that those Kipchaks in Georgia who had joined the Georgian church, who prayed in the language of that church, felt themselves to be Georgians on the eve of the Ottoman conquests. Even this is not accurate, if it suggests that Ajarian peasants were conscious of belonging to a “nation” or an “ethnic group” at all.

Even today, when asked whether the Ajarians consider themselves to be Turks or Georgians first, observers who have spent time in the region answer “Ajarians.”³³ During Ottoman times, this remote corner of the empire enjoyed a de-facto independence, and, as was common in peasant societies everywhere in the pre-modern world, local bonds of family and clan were often the strongest tokens of identity. As noted above, when the Social Democrats first tried to turn the concrete grievances of the Gurian peasantry in a political direction, they were frustrated (and perhaps surprised) to find that they were moved neither by appeals to church nor to nationality. Someone who was inclined to argue that Ajarians are as Georgian as Gurians might be tempted to

³³ From a personal conversation with foreign diplomats formerly stationed in Georgia.

note this as well – and to note that all Georgians have unusually strong attachments to their historic provinces, and that this does not keep them from feeling Georgian. This may be so, and it may even be so today for the Georgian Ajarians – as no one really knows the extent to which feelings have changed during Soviet times.

As for the Ajarians in Turkey, though there is not enough evidence to make a really convincing claim, it appears that identity is still also specific – that they neither consider themselves simply Georgians who happen to be Muslims, as the staff of *Çveneburi* seem to believe, nor are they obsessed with their Kipchak ancestry. For many Turkish Ajarians, there seems to be no conflict inherent in believing themselves to be descended from Christian Georgians, yet no longer a part of the Georgian nation. It may not be so difficult for them to square their non-Turkic origins with feelings of Turkishness.

If the identity of the majority of Ajarians before the Soviet period was almost certainly local and religious, rather than racial or linguistic, what can be said of people like Memed Abashidze and the members of his Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia? For some Turkish historians, they were no more than spies.³⁴ Clearly, they received support from Georgian sources. But does this mean that they were an entirely artificial creation of Christian Georgia?

³⁴ Gökdemir, p.75.

Memed and Aslan Abashidze were wealthy, educated scions of noble families, growing up in one of the most politicized cities of Caucasia. It is not unreasonable to suppose that they were, like their Christian Georgian peers, and like the pan-Turanians in Turkey, caught up in the wave of nationalist thinking which was challenging religiously-based systems of identity throughout the Ottoman and Russian empires. It would have been very strange if the influence of Islam and Turkish culture was so strong, that the Ajarian elite was unable to produce at least a few examples of this kind of individual – especially if exposed to the thought currents prevalent in Georgian society, with their unusual emphasis on language.³⁵

³⁵ Memed and Aslan Abashidze's identity is not as clear cut as some historians make it out to be. Aslan especially, was tied to Turkey in earlier life – he studied politics and government in Istanbul, and served with distinction as an Ottoman military officer in the Balkan Wars. He died in Izmir in 1926. Ahmet Acar, *Tarihte Hamşioğulları* (Ankara: Turizm Geliştirme Vakfı Yayındır, 1995), pp. 182 and 206.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROGNOSSES

Aslan Abashidze:

Almost unnoticed outside of Georgia, Abashidze has managed to steer a course between Ankara, Tbilisi and Moscow to survive almost unchallenged for nearly a decade. He has kept Ajaria the quietest corner of the Caucasus. Lacking an overarching plan, an internationalist ideology, or a quixotic romantic nationalist crusade, he has gone against the grain of the hedonistic post-Soviet character. He has invested in paint and new glass, parks, clean streets and other kinds of post-Soviet urban renewal. He has skimmed money off the trade between Turkey and the CIS and invested some part of it, we do not know how small, in projects that enrich not only himself and his clan, but also ordinary citizens.

At a time when the president of the country was literally looking for the Holy Grail in a Georgian monastery, Aslan Abashidze kept the armed poets and playwrights of the Mkhedrioni and similar paramilitary groups out of Ajaria. Armed as they were with romantic Christian Orthodox nationalism as well as kalashnikovs, their entrance into Ajaria, where Islam is still a symbol of identity, if not a part of daily life, might have catalyzed the kind of bloody ethnic reawakening that happened in Bosnia.

No doubt, most Bosnians would have preferred to miss out on their reawakening. Nonetheless, it appears that between the protection offered by Abashidze and his Russian troops, the demands of everyday life, and perhaps, the watchful eye of Mr. Abashidze's sister-in-law (head of the local KGB), the

Ajarians have missed an opportunity to achieve national consciousness. They will therefore go on feeling that they are Ajarians: in some ways Georgian, also connected to Turkey, but mostly traditional mountain people who would rather not be bothered by nationalism or nations if it means more control by outsiders.

Abashidze's moderate authoritarian stewardship has suited his people. They are protected from the winds of change and war, and are allowed to go about their business with out much thought for "national identity". The question of what that identity might be if this protection were to be removed and they were to find themselves at the mercy of outsiders, can only be answered in the most speculative way. It is very likely, however, that they would prefer not to be challenged at all in a way that would force identity out of the private and into the public sphere.

Prognosis for regime change in Ajaria:

Aslan Abashidze will likely rule in Ajaria until he dies, possibly of natural causes, possibly not. He can continue to rule because he has worked out a *modus vivendi* with Shevardnadze and Moscow, and because he has been so careful not to challenge those more powerful than himself in substantive ways - sticking mostly to symbolic measures and verbal protest. His rule will continue because an autonomous Ajaria is perhaps useful to Tbilisi - which is anxious to prove to Abkhazia that it can tolerate such an arrangement. It will likely continue because it is relatively popular, despite not being democratic, and because there is no obvious scenario for its demise.

There is of course the possibility that after the Russian troops finally pull out of Ajaria, the Georgian government will feel strong enough to bring him down by force. This would have the disadvantage, mentioned above, of strengthening the hand of Abkhazian separatists in the international arena, and is likely to make them even more intransigent in their demands. However, there is also the strong possibility that many of the so-called “Russian” border troops will not leave at all, but will simply stay with the government which pays them rather than obey the one to which they owe nominal allegiance. After all, almost any posting in Russia will be a step down from Batumi’s sub-tropical climate and business opportunities. Recent reports suggest that Abashidze will not be confronted on this issue, and will instead be accommodated in his desire to wield influence over the troops, no matter what their official loyalties might be.

The other possible scenario that would see Abashidze leave his current post is much different. He could be elected president of Georgia. As of this writing, he and his party are said to be seriously weighing whether he should be a candidate in the next elections. It is unlikely, given his limited power base outside Ajaria that he could succeed. Still, it is very difficult to accurately gauge the popularity of any politician in a nation like Georgia. How he would fare in a nationwide campaign is still a matter of conjecture.

Prognoses for Stability after Shevardnadze and Abashidze:

The combination of Aslan Abashidze’s stable authoritarian rule and Shevardnadze’s non-confrontational response to the de-facto independence of Ajaria have led to nearly a decade of stability on the border between Turkey

and Georgia. There are several developments that could upset this arrangement. Above all, since Shevardnadze is getting older, and Abashidze is not in the best of health, one must ask the question: how will this stability last without one or both of these men?

There is a real risk that peace in Ajaria may not survive Shevardnadze and Abashidze. There are several likely scenarios.

The first is that, following the death of Abashidze, the central government will take advantage of any struggle for power to put their own man on the throne in Batumi. Abashidze has no obvious heir being groomed for power, and while it is possible that the old nomenclatura who lead the Revival party in Ajaria will stick together, it still may not be enough for them to prevail without a leadership figure of Abashidze's stature. Abashidze's son Giorgi is still quite young (in his early twenties) and reportedly has no interest in politics¹. Perhaps a more distant relative will emerge to keep power within the clan.

The second likely scenario is the return of romantic nationalism to politics in Tbilisi. While the consequences of Gamsakhurdia's nationalist policies have not been forgotten, Georgia is by nature a proud, patriotic society, and some form of nationalism is bound to reenter politics after the era of Shevardnadze. Due to the nature of Georgian national identity, this will necessarily involve religious and linguistic chauvinism.

¹ Interview with Tefik Okyayuz, former Turkish Ambassador to Georgia.

Another possibility, a version of the same scenario, is that Abashidze's successor in Batumi, in a bid to establish his legitimacy and the legitimacy of Ajarian autonomy, might manipulate the Muslim factor in Ajarian identity. Abashidze has also done this, but without losing the balance between his exploitation of loyalties owed to him due to his religion and clan affiliations, and the suppression of religion in politics.

Personal frictions could also spark off conflict between Ajaria and the center. The speaker of the parliament, Zurab Zhvania, is quite popular in Georgia, and is sometimes mentioned as a possible Shevardnadze successor. Whether Abashidze could watch the ascendance of his archenemy without taking some kind of rash action, such as making overtly separatist statements, or announcing a plebiscite on independence, remains to be seen. It is also hard to imagine Zhvania leaving the man who has caused him so much personal grief in power if he had the chance to do anything about it. It is certainly hard to imagine the two of them developing the kind of understanding that Abashidze and Shevardnadze seem to have reached. Zhvania is not the only enemy Abashidze has made in Tbilisi; it is fair to say that he is widely despised there in the corridors of power.

In short, the prognosis for stability in Ajaria and for its neighbors is good, as long as the moderate duo of Shevardnadze and Abashidze remain in power. If one or the other of them goes, the other will find himself sorely tempted to seize control of the other's political and economic machinery. Shevardnadze could do this by installing his own man in Ajaria or coming to a deal with a

much-weakened post-Abashidze nomenclatura. Abashidze could do this by making a run for the presidency, which in the absence of Shevardnadze might be attainable for a prominent outsider. After both men have left the scene, there is a danger that the lure of romantic nationalism and the exploitation of religion could be irresistible for leaders wishing to legitimize their rule.

On the other hand, Georgian politicians must know they have much to lose by creating conflict between Christians and Muslims in Georgia. While the relationship between Georgian Ajarians and Christian Georgians has obviously changed since the days when the former fought for Turkey, the emergence of a new Gamsakhurdia could restore the old pre-Communist relationship between them. Any perceived oppression of Ajarians in Georgia would sour relations with Turkey, and good relations with Turkey will be a top priority for any rational Georgian leader. How to reassert control over this piece of Georgian territory without alarming the local population or allowing religious nationalism to rear its head would be a major challenge for a responsible future Georgian government. If not done carefully, such a move could rob Ajaria of its unusual stability.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:

- Acar, Ahmet. 1995. *Tarihte Hamşioğulları*. Ankara: Turizm Geliştirme Vakfı Yayındır.
- Acaristan Özerk Cumhuriyeti*. 1997. İznik: İznik Batum ve Havalisi Kültür Derneği.
- Adjaria*. 1986. Moscow: Planeta Press.
- Allen, W. E. D. 1932. *A History of the Georgian People*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & co.
- Allen, W. E. D., and Paul Muratoff. 1953. *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border, 1828 – 1921*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.
- Bacque-Grammont, Jean Louis, and Chahryar Adle. 1991. *Les Ottomans, Les Safavides et la Géorgie: 1514-1524* (The Ottomans, The Safavids, and Georgia). Istanbul: Isis Press.
- Baev, Pavel. 1997. *Russia's Policies in the Caucasus*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997.
- Gachechiladze, Revaz. 1995. *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press.
- Gamsakhurdia, Zviad. 1991. *The Spiritual Mission of Georgia*. Tbilisi: Ganatleba Publishers.
- Gökdemir, Ahmet. 1998. *Cenûb-i Garbî Kafkas Hükûmeti*. Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi.
- Kazemzadeh, Firuz. 1951. *The Struggle for Transcaucasia: 1917 – 1921*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Knight, Amy. 1993. *Beria: Stalin's First Lieutenant*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Komakhidze, Temuraz. 1994. *Sin Otechestva – The Patriot*. Batumi: Ajara.
- Lang, David Marshall. 1966. *The Georgians*. New York: Praeger.
- Magnarella, Paul. 1979. *The Peasant Venture*. Cambridge: Schenkman.

- Manvelichvili, Alexandre. 1951. *Histoire de Géorgie* (History of Georgia). Paris: Nouvelles Editions de la Toison d'Or.
- Menteshashvili, Avatandil. 1992. *Some National and Ethnic Problems in Georgia: 1918-1922*. Tbilisi: Samshoblo Press.
- Meskhia, Shota. 1968. *An Outline of Georgian History*. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press.
- Nesmyth, Peter. 1998. *Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Salia, Kalistrat. 1980. *Histoire de la Nation Géorgienne*. (History of the Georgian Nation). Paris: Nino Salia.
- Simon, Gerhard. 1991. *Nationalism and Policy Towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post Stalinist Society*. Forster and Forster, trans., Boulder: Westview Press.
- Suny, Ronald Grigor. 1994. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Toumarkine, Alexandre. 1995. *Les Laze en Turquie: XIXe-XXe siècles*. (The Laz in Turkey: 19th-20th centuries). Istanbul: Isis Press.
- T C Genelkurmay Başkanlığı. 1995. *Türk İstiklâl Harbi: Doğu Cephesi*. (vol. 3) Ankara: Genelkurmay Basım Evi.

Articles:

- Anonymous. 1999. "Deadline Set for Russian Border Guards to Leave Georgia." *RFE/RL Newsline*. 16 August.
- Anonymous. 1999. "Is Adjara Leader in Danger of Being Killed?" *RFE/RL Newsline*. 8 March.
- Anonymous. 1998. "Mkhedrioni Trial Continues." *RFE/RL Newsline*. 22 January.
- Anonymous. 1997. "The Lion Roars." *Georgia Profile* November: 12. Internet version (<http://www.georgiaprofile.caucasus.net/nov97/p12.html>).
- Anonymous. 1997. "Hunting Lions in Ajaria" *Georgia Profile*. June: 21-23.
- Anonymous. 1997. "The Whiff of Corruption: Family Clans in the Democratic Process." *Georgia Profile* June: 18-20
- Anonymous. 1997. "Ajarian Leader sees Georgians Behind Death Ray Attack." *RFE/RL Newsline*. 5 December.

- Anonymous. 1997. "Georgian Parliament Speaker Denies Anti-Adjar Plot." *RFE/RL Newsline*. 21 October.
- Anonymous. 1996 – 1999. "Georgia." *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Internet Edition. (<http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/countries/Geor.html>).
- Anonymous. 1994. "Shevardnadze Endorses Free Economic Zone in Ajaria" *RFE/RL Newsline*. 28 November.
- Bendianishvili, A. S. 1990. "Rusko-Turetzkaya Voina 1877-1878" (Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878) *Ocherki Istorii Gruzii* (Essays in Georgian History). Tbilisii: Mezniyereba.
- Bernstein, J. 1992. "Georgia's Political Theater." *The American Spectator*, March:31-34. EBSCO item no. 9206291316.
- Bryer, Anthony. 1969. "The Last Laz Risings and the Downfall of the Pontic Derebeys." *Bedi Kartlisa*. 26: 191-210.
- Çiloğlu, Fahrettin. 1995. "Tarihi ve Coğrafi Bölgeleriyle Gürcüstan Acara" *Çveneburi*. January-February:16-18.
- Çiloğlu, Fahrettin. 1993. "Abhazya Sorunu." *Çveneburi*. January-February:28.
- Dravis, Mike. 1995. "Adzhar in Georgia." Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland. (<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidem/mar/gadzhar.htm>).
- Dzhorbenadze, Irina. 1996. "Georgia: Free Economic Zones – Obvious Merits and Improbable Shortcomings." *Delovoy Mir*. 26 December: 2. In FBIS-SOV-97-016.
- Fairbanks, Charles. 1996. "Clientelism and the roots of Post-Soviet Disorder." In R. G. Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fairbanks, Charles. 1978. "National Cadres as a Force in the Soviet System: The Evidence of Beria's Career, 1949-53." In J. Azreal, ed., *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*. New York: Praeger.
- Fuller, Liz. 1993. "Aslan Abashidze: Georgia's Next Leader." *RFE/RL Research Reports*. 2(44): 23-26.
- Gogebashvili, Iakob. 1993. "Yüzyılın Başında Acara." *Çveneburi*. July-October 1993:23-25.
- Henze, Paul. 1992. "Turkey and Georgia: Expanding Relations." Santa Monica: RAND.

- Hewett, George. 1995. "Yet a Third Consideration of 'Völker, Sprachen und Kulturen des Südlichen Kaukasus.'" *Central Asian Survey*. 14(2): 289.
- Imedashvili, Koba. 1998. "E. Şevardnadze ile "Acara Günleri" Söyleşisi." *Çveneburi*. October-November: 2-3.
- Kondrashov, Alexandr. 1997. "Our Friendship is Like a River. On the Question of the 'Hand of Moscow' in Ajaria." *Trud*. 21 January. In FBIS-SOV-97-015.
- Koroleva, Olga. 1998. "Adjarskii Bloknot: Respublika Gdye ne Boyatsya Ruskikh Tankov." (Ajarian Notebook: Republic Where They Aren't Afraid of Russian Tanks). January: 4. Internet version from Russianstory.com.
- van der Leeuw, Charles. 1999. "Georgia's Troubled Corners – Javakheti: Karabakh Revisited." *The Azeri Times*. March.
- Lortkipanidze, Mariam. 1993. "Abhazya, Gürcüstan'ın Ayrılmaz bir Kısım"dır." *Çveneburi*. March-June: 14.
- Mazilkina, Irina. 1998. "Batumi: Pogranichnie Remarki." (Batumi: Notes from the Frontier). *Rodina: Rossiya I Turtzia, 500 let* (Motherland: Russia and Turkey, 500 years)1: 148-151.
- Mercan, Osman Nuri. 1993. "Türkiye'de ilk Modern Traş Bıçağı Fabrikasını biz Kurduk." *Çveneburi*. November-December: 14.
- Minasyan, Liana. 1997. "Will General Rokhlin Pull Russia's Bases out of the Transcaucasus?" *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. 12 February: 7. In FBIS-SOV-97-041.
- Mgeladze, Nugzar. 1994. "Ajarians." in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*. New York: G. K. Hall.
- Nodia, Ghia. 1995. "Georgia's Identity Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* 6(5): 106-107.
- Nodia, Ghia. 1991. "Loyal or Dangerous?" *WarReport* 48: 1-4. Internet edition. (<http://www.omri.cz/wr/nodia48.htm>).
- Panarin, Sergei. 1994. "Political Dynamics of the 'New' East (1985-1993)." In V. Naumkin ed., *Central Asia and Transcaucasia*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Radio Tbilisi. 1998. "Interview with Eduard Shevardnadze" 12 October. In FBIS-SOV-98-294.
- Saygılı, Hasan Tahsin (Bejanidze). 1993. "Ahmet Özkan (Melaşvili)." *Çveneburi*. January-February: 4-7.

Swietochowski, Tadeusz. 1996. "National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905-1920." In R. G. Suny ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism and Social Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Talbot, Strobe. 1991. "Growls in the Garden," *Time* 10 June: 34. EBSCO item no. 9106102020.

Tsereteli, Vera. 1998. "Georgia Has Decided to Make Russian Border Guards' Life Easier." *Obshchaya Gazeta*. 25 June – 1 July: 5. In FBIS-SOV-98-267.

Uysal, Inanç. 1998. "Batumi'a Cami İsteği." *Zaman*, 28 June:4.

Unpublished Sources, Interviews and Miscellaneous:

Ajaria News Agency. 1998. "Georgia: Adjarian Autonomous Republic." Unpublished pamphlet. Batumi.

All-Georgian Union for Revival. 1995. *Vsyegruzinskii Soyuz Vozrozhdenia* (All Georgian Union for Revival). Campaign pamphlet. Batumi.

Baguridze, Temaz. November, 1998. Interview with the author, Batumi, Georgia.

Darchiashvili, David. 1996. "Adzharia – Perekrestok Tsivilizatsii" (Ajaria – at the Crossroads of Civilizations). Unpublished paper. Tbilisi, Georgia.

Derluguian, Georgii M. 1995. "historical Sociological Interpretation of Nationalist Separatism in the Four Former Soviet Autonomous Republics: Tataria, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Ajaria." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Binghamton, NY: State University of New York, Binghamton.

Grigolia, Alexander. 1939. "Custom and Justice in the Caucasus." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Gündoğdu, Asude. 1998. "Konu: Göç Eden Gürcüler, Tür: Röportaj." Unpublished undergraduate paper, Ankara, Turkey. Bilkent University.

Gündoğdu, Asude. 1998. "'Acara Bölgesi ve Halkının Etnik Kimliği' Konusunda Görüşler." Unpublished undergraduate paper, Ankara, Turkey. Bilkent University.

Kamkamidze, Irakli. November, 1998. Interview with the author. Tbilisi, Georgia.

Mgeladze, Nugzar. November, 1998. Interview with the author. Batumi, Georgia.

Okyayuz, Tefik. Spring, 1999. Interview with the author. Ankara, Turkey.