

---

# Georgia : The Ignored History

By Robert English

The New York Review of Books - 6/10/2008

---

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first post-Soviet president, from 1991 to 1992, has been dead for fifteen years. But in view of his responsibility for initially provoking the South Ossetian campaign to secede from Georgia--the conflict that set off last month's war with Russia--his brief but tumultuous reign merits some fresh scrutiny. Trying to understand the Ossetian, Abkhazian, and other minorities' alienation from Georgia without reference to the extreme nationalism of Gamsakhurdia is like trying to explain Yugoslavia's collapse and Kosovo's secession from Serbia while ignoring the nationalist policies of Slobodan Milosevic. Yet in all the debate over the causes of the Russian-Georgian war, Gamsakhurdia is rarely even mentioned.

Instead, when those responsible are cited, Vladimir Putin invariably comes first. As Russian prime minister he ordered Moscow's brutal offensive into Georgia, and earlier, as president, he tacitly supported both the South Ossetian and Abkhazian secessionists. Next comes Mikheil Saakashvili, the impetuous and vocally pro-American Georgian president who gambled on a lightning strike to retake South Ossetia under pressure of escalating artillery fire from the separatists there.

Others fault President George W. Bush for championing the further expansion of NATO--already viewed by Moscow as hostile, as well as a violation of an implicit promise made at the end of the cold war--to include its strategically vital neighbors Georgia and Ukraine. And then there is Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator who as nationalities commissar in the early 1920s laid the foundation for post-Soviet conflicts by pitting subject peoples against one another ("planting mines," as Georgians say) to strengthen the Kremlin's control.

But lying between the immediate and the distant past is the Gamsakhurdia era, beginning in the late 1980s, the years of Soviet liberalization and the rise of assertive nationalism that did much to shape subsequent Georgian politics--right up to the present. Gamsakhurdia, then mainly known in the West as a scholar and dissident, was also a fiery Georgian nationalist who, like Serbia's Milosevic, rode to power on a wave of chauvinist passions. Both were demagogues who manipulated justified popular grievances and crude popular prejudices to demonize "enemies"--a tactic that soon became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While Milosevic's "Greater Serbia" was to be built with territory seized from neighbors Croatia and Bosnia, where Serb minorities were supposedly in mortal danger, Gamsakhurdia's "Georgia for the Georgians" would be established by curtailing the rights and autonomies enjoyed by Georgia's internal minorities, privileges he saw as divisive vestiges of the Soviet system.[1] And as he acted on that program--rising between 1988 and 1991 from opposition leader to parliamentarian to president, Georgian relations with the republic's Abkhazian and Ossetian enclaves went from being strained to being violent.

Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric provoked fear among all Georgian minorities--Adjars, Armenians, Azeris, Greeks, Russians, Abkhazians, and Ossetians. The latter

two were especially concerned to protect their cultural rights and self-rule by means of the new opportunities offered by Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika. These included free speech, multiparty elections, the devolution of power to local parliaments, and in 1991 an invitation to redraw the USSR's constitutional basis in a new union treaty.

Gamsakhurdia and his allies responded with fury. Large rallies in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi denounced the Abkhazians and Ossetians as "traitors" and "pawns of the Kremlin" while groups of angry Georgians took their protests directly to the Abkhazian and Ossetian capitals of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The resulting confrontations often turned violent. A 1989 move by officials in Tbilisi to shut down part of the university in Sukhumi and replace it with a branch of the Georgian State University set off more bloodshed. In response to this clash--and the Abkhazians' declaration of sovereignty--Georgian nationalists began an anti-Abkhazian rally that grew into a weeklong protest in downtown Tbilisi. That demonstration was violently suppressed by Soviet troops in April 1989 at a cost of twenty Georgian lives, further fanning Georgian passions and prompting a series of fateful steps by the Georgian parliament.

First, it passed a law making Georgian the sole official language, a measure blatantly discriminatory toward the republic's non-Georgian minorities.[2] Later in 1989, it banned parties that operated only "regionally" from participating in general elections in the Georgian republic, a transparent ploy to disenfranchise Abkhazian and South Ossetian voters.[3] In 1990, as the Ossetians moved toward secession from the soon-to-be-independent republic of Georgia, a newly elected Georgian parliament, led by Gamsakhurdia, simply revoked their autonomous status altogether. In March 1991, Gamsakhurdia banned Georgians from voting in Gorbachev's USSR-wide referendum on preserving the Soviet Union. The Abkhazians defied this ban and organized their own balloting for the referendum, while Gamsakhurdia held a separate vote on Georgia's secession from the USSR.

Some 90 percent of Georgians voted for independence, and the Abkhazians voted even more overwhelmingly to preserve the union--which they saw as the only guarantor of their autonomous rights--and, notably, were joined by large majorities of all the region's other non-Georgian peoples as well. A month later, Gamsakhurdia was elected president--he received 86 percent of the vote on a turnout of 82 percent. Almost immediately he dispatched handpicked "prefects" to take over the authority of locally appointed officials, a blow to democracy criticized even by many of his Western admirers. Large-scale interethnic violence was not far behind.

All this is a matter of record, though still little known in the West. Even less understood is the intensity of Georgian nationalism at that time. Escape from the USSR was the primary goal, accompanied by a romanticized idea of a unitary "Georgian national state." The dark side of this vision was a desire to settle scores with minorities, chiefly the Abkhazians and Ossetians, who were seen to have benefited at Georgia's expense from a Kremlin policy of "divide and rule." These groups were scorned by Gamsakhurdia as "ungrateful guests in the Georgian home." His nationalist ally, Giorgi Chan-turia, called for creation of a "theo-democracy" under which one house of parliament would be composed of the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Church's patriarch, Catholicos Ilya II, was given to incendiary rhetoric such as his claim that the 1990 flooding that devastated another minority region, Adjara, in the southwest of the country, was God's revenge for their ancestors' conversion to Islam.[4] Gamsakhurdia, for his part, slandered Georgia's Muslim communities as "Tatardom" and also criticized Georgians' intermarriage with non-Georgians.

The Abkhazians and Ossetians, predominantly Orthodox Christians, were increasingly reviled for their defiance of Georgia's efforts to unify the country under a strong nationalist regime. The Ossetians were even accused of "bringing Bolshevism to Georgia" in the first place.[5] Russian critics of Gamsakhurdia--among them the human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov--were savaged as "agents of Moscow." (Sakharov, who supported independence movements from the Baltics to Armenia, saw something different in Georgia. There the Soviet empire was being replaced, under Gamsakhurdia, by a "Georgian empire.") As Gamsakhurdia's megalomania grew, journalists who dared criticize him were subject to intimidation or even arrest (and their newspapers subject to censorship or closure), while Georgian state television fostered a cult of Gamsakhurdia as the national savior. And as ethnic tensions worsened and secessionist forces became stronger with each new incident of violence--for which most Georgians blindly believed their side was entirely blameless--Gamsakhurdia ranted that subversive minorities should be chopped up, they should be burned out with a red-hot iron from the Georgian nation.... We will deal with all the traitors, hold all of them to proper account, and drive [out] all the evil enemies and non-Georgians...!"[6]

In 1990 my wife, a Newsweek correspondent, was declared "an enemy of the Georgian people" for an article critical of Gamsakhurdia. Meanwhile, as an academic working in Tbilisi, I followed the denunciations and ostracism that hounded my host--the eminent Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili--to a premature death later that year. Merab's "sins" included criticism of hysterical Georgian chauvinism and also of the insulting, one-sided portrayal of Russia (and of the reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev) in the Georgian press.[7]

As a student of Yugoslavia as well as Georgia, I was struck by Gamsakhurdia's autocratic behavior and his crackdown on liberal dissent at precisely the same moment that Serbia's Milosevic was repressing the liberal, antiwar Serbian opposition. Both Milosevic and Gamsakhurdia soon alienated many urban-educated voters and came to rely on angry rural mobs (Milosevic had his slivovitz-fueled "rent-a-crowds"; Gamsakhurdia had his so-called "black stockings," legions of adoring, middle-aged women). Both demagogues persecuted their domestic critics and blamed minority conflicts on foreign "enemies" (for Milosevic it was Germany and the Vatican, for Gamsakhurdia it was Russia).

Certainly Gamsakhurdia was nowhere near as vicious as his Serbian counterpart. Nor was he anywhere near as competent. While Milosevic effectively managed the "socialist" system for the benefit of himself and his cronies, Gamsakhurdia proved ineffective at managing even the most basic tasks of government. While Milosevic organized a corrupt economy and employed paramilitary warlords for his own nefarious purposes, Gamsakhurdia quickly lost control of both a collapsing economy and Georgia's increasingly powerful mafiosi-warlords (such as Jaba Ioseliani, a convicted bank robber and murderer). In search of both pride and plunder, the paramilitary groups of the warlords--including Ioseliani's Mkhedrioni, or "Horsemen," the Society of White George, and several others--instigated numerous clashes with Georgian minorities. Even the official Georgian National Guard (led by Gamsakhurdia ally Tengiz Kitovani, a professional artist) proved an undisciplined force that engaged in wanton destruction and civilian killings during a bloody but unsuccessful effort to suppress the South Ossetian separatists.

Kitovani and Ioseliani soon rebelled against Gamsakhurdia himself, deposing their president in a coup in January 1992. That summer, in the shadow of a gathering effort by Gamsakhurdia loyalists to regain power, the two warlords

launched a violent assault on Abkhazia that backfired utterly. After a swift and devastating initial advance the invasion bogged down, distracted by Gamsakhurdia's growing insurgency. Meanwhile, with Russia now providing large-scale aid to the outgunned Abkhazian fighters, the latter quickly routed the Georgian National Guard--along with the Mkhedrioni and other Georgian paramilitary marauders--and eventually forced over 200,000 ethnic Georgians from their homes in Abkhazia.[8]

It hardly mattered that Eduard Shevardnadze, internationally admired as Gorbachev's liberal foreign minister, had returned from Moscow in March of 1992 to head a provisional Georgian government. It took many months before he was able to gain some measure of control--struggling simultaneously with an inherited war in Abkhazia, a renegade army and warlords, and Gamsakhurdia's attempted revanche. By the time of Shevardnadze's own election as Georgian president in 1995, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had long since achieved de facto independence.[9]

All this is especially tragic because it could have been avoided. Many Russians, including then-president Boris Yeltsin, were sympathetic to the non-Russian republics' desire for independence from the USSR. And many Abkhazians and Ossetians were initially hopeful of their prospects in a free, democratic Georgia. "We could have left the [Soviet] Union together, as brothers," one Ossetian leader told us in Tskhinvali in 1991. But Gamsakhurdia's aggressive nationalism and strident denunciations of "devil Russia" and its "traitorous" allies within Georgia pushed moderate Abkhazians and Ossetians into support of outright secession and of an unholy alliance with reactionary elements in the Russian military (who began arming them behind Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's backs as they struggled with their own hardliners between 1991 and 1993).[10] By the time of Putin's rise in 1999, Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric had long since become a self-fulfilling prophecy--both the Abkhazians and Ossetians had voted overwhelmingly for secession.[11] And by 1999, of course, Russian policy toward Georgia, and the broader Caucasian-Caspian region, had also become part of a larger contest for influence with the West.

None of this is to defend Moscow's manipulation of post-Soviet conflicts to dominate its neighbors--though it is vital to discern the difference in motives behind an offensive, "neo-imperial" strategy and a defensive, "anti-NATO" tactic. Nor is it to justify the devastating attack on Georgia--though Moscow was also clearly lashing out at the West, with pent-up fury for what it sees as an American strategy of isolating and encircling Russia (the attack was also, in effect, a preventive strike against two NATO bases-in-the-making in Georgia). What is important, however, is to highlight the Georgians' own initial victimization of others in a tragedy in which they ultimately became victims themselves.

Of course it is "unfair" that Georgians today reap the bitter fruits of what Gamsakhurdia sowed in years past--just as it is unfair that today's Serbs still pay for the sins of Milosevic. And certainly Gamsakhurdia was far from the coldblooded killer that Milosevic was. Yet consider the roughly one thousand South Ossetians who died resisting efforts to impose central Georgian control in 1991 and 1992; for a population of under 100,000 this represents a per capita death toll over twice as high as that which Milosevic inflicted on Kosovo. (Milosevic's Kosovo savagery took some 10,000 lives, out of a Kosovo Albanian population of nearly 2,000,000.)

Consider, too, that one of Saakashvili's first acts as president in 2004 was to ceremoniously rehabilitate Gamsakhurdia, hailing him as a "great statesman and patriot." Many in the West criticized Saakashvili's 2007 crackdown on opposition politicians and the press, but few noted this earlier insult to

Georgia's restive minorities. Nor are most aware of the continuing tensions between the Tbilisi government and the country's Armenian, Azeri, and other non-Georgian peoples--many of whom sympathized with the Ossetians, not the Georgians, in the recent war--over ongoing linguistic, economic, and even religious discrimination. Certainly Saakashvili is not the extreme nationalist that Gamsakhurdia was. And along with some provocative steps, he has also made notable efforts toward reconciliation. But his purge of senior Georgian officials from the previous government, and his replacement of them by ministers and ambassadors who in some cases were barely in their teens during the Gamsakhurdia era, seems also to have purged valuable assets of experience, caution, humility, and even recent memory.

We must hope that urgent diplomatic and economic support from abroad, together with some self-critical reflection by Georgians at home, will yet help this proud, long-suffering people escape the humiliation and the debilitating cult of "innocent martyrdom" that has plagued post-Kosovo Serbia. But the Western media that blindly follow the Georgian nationalist line in discounting Ossetian and Abkhazian grievances--viewing their separatist aspirations as largely illegitimate or a Russian invention and casting the entire conflict as the Georgian David vs. Russian Goliath--serve neither the cause of truth nor reconciliation. And American officials who embrace this simplistic narrative--and who reflexively call for Georgia's rapid rearming and accelerated accession to NATO--risk further inflaming confrontation with Russia to the grave detriment of both Western and Georgian interests.

--October 8, 2008

Notes [1]Georgian nationalists such as Gamsakhurdia simply denied the Ossetians' right to autonomous status, viewing them as recent interlopers in a historically Georgian region whose real homeland was across the border in Russia. And the Abkhazians, they noted, hardly deserved special privileges in a region where they made up barely 18 percent of the population. "That's just it," countered Abkhaz leaders. After the Georgian tyrant Stalin decimated them in the 1930s and 1940s, subsequent policies encouraging Georgians, Russians, and Armenians to emigrate to Abkhazia had reduced the Abkhazians to such a precarious position in their homeland that they required special status and cultural protections. The parallels here with polemics between Serbs and ethnic Albanians over the history and demographics of Kosovo are worth noting.

[2]The Abkhazians and Ossetians naturally used their native languages first and Russian, the Soviet lingua franca, second; only a modest percentage spoke Georgian well enough to use it as the official language.

[3]As a result of this ban, and also thanks to the minorities' growing boycott of official Tbilisi, the new Georgian parliament elected in October 1990 seated only nine non-Georgians out of a total of 245 deputies--and this in a republic where minorities made up some 30 percent of the population.

[4]On Ilya II see Fairy von Lilienfeld, "Reflections on the Current State of the Georgian Church and Nation," in *Seeking God*, edited by Stephen K. Batalden (Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 227.

[5]For more detail on this period see Robert English, "'Internal Enemies, External Enemies': Elites, Identity, and the Tragedy of Post-Soviet Georgia," in *Russia and Eastern Europe After Communism*, edited by Michael Kraus and Ronald D. Liebowitz (Westview, 1996).

[6]Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 110.

[7]Gorbachev was widely blamed for the 1989 "Tbilisi massacre." In fact, while guilty of fumbling the investigation that followed, Gorbachev was not responsible for the crackdown. He was traveling abroad when hard-line Politburo rivals acceded to the Georgian Communist Party's request for Interior Ministry troops to "restore order," and the actual decision to use force was taken by the local commander in consultation with the Georgian Communist Party boss.

[8]Thus the fate of these Georgian refugees is very similar to that of the Serbian refugees from Croatia and Kosovo --the victims of savage wars launched ostensibly to protect them.

[9]For further detail see Alexei Zverev, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus, 1988-1994," and Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia," in *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, edited by Bruno Coppieters (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1996).

[10]By and large, the Soviet military's initial role was a fairly evenhanded one--acting as peacekeepers between Georgian forces and Ossetian/Abkhazian militias--and only tilted strongly in the secessionists' favor after the Georgian side's major assaults of 1991-1992. It also seems that this change resulted not from a considered decision of Gorbachev or Yeltsin, but from commanders taking advantage of the chaos that attended the Soviet collapse to punish their Georgian antagonists. By 1994, support for the Abkhazians and South Ossetians--who had repeatedly begged Moscow for support--hardened into a consistent Russian policy. On Russian policy see Svante E. Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus-Cases in Georgia* (Uppsala University, 2002), pp. 182-183.

[11]The Georgian nationalist view ignores the confusion and fluidity of Soviet/Russian policy over the period of the USSR's collapse, and sees instead an early, consistent strategy of support for secession in order to cripple Georgia. In this selective and self-serving interpretation, Tbilisi's inflammatory rhetoric and discriminatory policies are absolved of blame for subsequent conflict because it was all orchestrated by Moscow from the outset.

---