

### 3 National identity and myths of ethnogenesis in Transcaucasia

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In the post-Soviet period Transcaucasia has been especially prone to violent inter-ethnic conflict, as communities have sought to redefine their relations with neighbouring 'others' in localities characterised by a mosaic of interwoven communities whose understandings of sovereign space do not sit easily with the complex realities of ethnic geography. Three large-scale wars have been fought in the region since the late 1980s: between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, between Georgia and Abkhazia and between Georgia and South Ossetia. The aim of this chapter is not to explain why these wars occurred, but to explore how rival myths of homeland and overlapping 'claims to indigenesness' have informed the identities behind such contested understandings of sovereign space. It also seeks to explain the manner in which such myths have contributed to local ethnonationalists' belief in 'the inherent right of native peoples to exercise hegemony and fulfil their destiny in their ancestral homeland'.<sup>1</sup>

'The [home]land', as 'the place wherein memory is rooted', has always been a key building block of national identity, as part of what we have termed the tendency to territorialise ethnic boundary markers.<sup>2</sup> However, it can also be argued that 'homeland' is the place where pseudo-memory is encouraged to flourish and where a given group becomes infused with primordial ideas about the eternal state of their nation and the inalienable link with the land that is a gift of trust from their forefathers. As Stephen Velychenko has argued, this psychology was nurtured by Soviet historiography on the national question, which, despite its Marxist veneer, was profoundly primordialist in its approach.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the loosening of the constraints imposed by formal Marxism in the post-Soviet period has allowed local successor historiographies to become even more ethnocentric and teleological, as is also often the case with new nationalising regimes.

The current literature on ethnicity and nationalism emphasises the importance of national myths in cementing a would-be monolingual and

monocultural group as a solid cohesive community.<sup>4</sup> Although some authors are optimistic that this task can be accomplished 'without viewing the others as competitors and antagonists',<sup>5</sup> homeland myths in particular tend to be exclusive, squeezing out rival groups from the picture and delegitimizing their claims to the territory in question. Moreover, the more a group insists on its distinctiveness and peculiarities for the sake of stronger consolidation and solidarity, the more it tends to oppose itself to other 'alien' groups.<sup>6</sup> In the modern world 'difference implies hierarchy' and 'otherness . . . implies a moral judgement' more often than not.<sup>7</sup> Previous rivalries are revived and catalogued in order to assess a group's current state of security.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a group either establishes hierarchical relationships between itself and others in order to take a superior position, or dehumanises the outsiders in general.

Cementing a sense of 'otherness' is therefore a key goal of alternative ethnocentric versions of the past.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon was well understood by William Sumner, who developed a theory of ethnocentrism at the very beginning of this century,<sup>10</sup> later enriched by Camilla Wedgwood and other anthropologists,<sup>11</sup> who argued that ethnonationalist ideology always tends to be associated with a double moral standard: peace and order have to be maintained within a given group, but everything is permitted with respect to the out-group. Sumner's theory has been severely criticised from various points of view, and, with a few exceptions, has to date been applied only to pre-modern cultures, although Sumner himself insisted on its universal character. However, with some revisions and improvements,<sup>12</sup> his approach can help shed light on post-Soviet conditions and on the role played by ethnogenetic mythology in legitimating collective claims for material property or privileges, territory, political status or political power, cultural or linguistic domination, and the like, particularly in multicultural states where the temptation to use absolutist myths to close off claims to a privileged position in the polity is considerable.

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that these claims are not perceived in instrumental terms. Contemporary ethnogenetic myth-making tends to be the work of patriotic intellectuals, professional historians, archaeologists, linguists, researchers and university professors, who advertise their own constructions as the received truth. They therefore violently reject any characterisation of their own activity as mythological, although they are perfectly prepared to level the same accusation at their opponents. Moreover, the consumers of these sorts of myths treat them as end truths. Different and often opposite and incommensurable versions of history therefore clash with each other as if they were primordial

shibboleths, as ethnic groups who use the versions in question charge each other with the falsification of the past.

In this chapter we shall discuss the manner in which ethnonationalist historiography is used to claim the right to a given national homeland. We shall focus primarily on three cases, which demonstrate how ethnocentric ethnogenetic mythologies contributed to ideologies of confrontation in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the Armenian–Azerbaijani, Georgian–Abkhazian and Georgian–South Ossetian conflicts. The focus is mainly on the historiography of the distant past, as our subject is ideas of ‘ethnogenesis’ rather than more recent history.

### **The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict**

Ethnogenetic studies began in both republics in the 1940s, but their starting points, goals and basic historical resources were quite different.<sup>13</sup> First, the relatively rich Armenian historiographical tradition can be traced back to the first millennium AD, whereas the Azerbaijani historiographical tradition was really established only in the twentieth century. Secondly, the Armenians can plausibly refer to the Kingdom of Tigran the Great (95–56 BC) as the cradle of their statehood, whereas Azerbaijanis have no real past polity to celebrate before the establishment of the Azerbaijani SSR. Finally, the Armenians have been known as a distinct ethnic group with their own proper name since the first millennium BC, whereas the consolidation of the Azerbaijanis as a coherent ethnic group took place only after the 1920s.

Therefore from the very beginning ethnogenetic studies have had different meanings for Armenians and Azerbaijanis. For the Armenians, their purpose was to help recover from the genocide of 1915 and to provide psychological protection against the ‘Turkic threat’, in part by identifying the Azerbaijanis indiscriminately and erroneously with the Turkish people. On the other hand, for the Azerbaijanis the purpose of ethnogenetic studies was to establish their own distinct national identity, as the Soviet authorities were deeply hostile to any manifestations of pan-Turkism.

Most Armenian scholars therefore initially felt more comfortable with the ‘migration theory’,<sup>14</sup> which argued that proto-Armenian speakers first arrived in the Tigris valley in the twelfth century BC, before merging with the local inhabitants shortly afterwards. Azerbaijani scholars, on the other hand, argued that the Azerbaijani people were descended from the local Albanians, who were Iranianised in the first millennium BC and began to assimilate with Turkic-speaking newcomers during the first mil-

lennium AD (although most modern scholars accept that the Albanians were Christian). However, although the indigenous inhabitants were formally 'Turkified' by the eleventh to twelfth centuries, senior Azerbaijani scholars argued that this was largely superficial, and claimed that the 'Albanians' managed to retain the basic aspects of their traditional pre-Turkic culture.

The growth of nationalism in the last few decades has pushed territorial issues to the fore, and ethnogenetic arguments have had to be revised and rearranged accordingly. However, the revisionist historians who began to appear on both sides in the 1960s and 1970s tended to be more junior and less careful, albeit ambitious, scholars. Modern Armenian versions of ethnogenesis have attempted to integrate narratives of the ancient Hayasa polity, arguing that it played a central role in the emergence of the contemporary Armenian identity. Despite the serious objections of many scholars,<sup>15</sup> younger Armenian historians began to identify Hayasa with the Armenian self-names 'Haj' and 'Hayastan', and claim that it was the most ancient polity established by the Armenians, dating back to the middle of the second millennium BC. Rafael Ishkhanyan has gone even further, claiming that the Armenians and the Armenian language were already well established in Asia Minor in the third, even the fourth, millennium BC. In other words, the Armenians are the only 'true' (i.e. primordial indigenous) inhabitants of the Armenian plateau.<sup>16</sup>

The Armenian historian Khachatrian has argued that in spatial terms Hayasa corresponded to Nairi and later to Urartu-Armina, all of which were ancient polities of the late second and early first millennia BC.<sup>17</sup> His aim is to prove the widespread belief in contemporary Armenia that Armenians made up the majority of the population in the state of Urartu (ninth to seventh centuries BC), whereas the Urartians themselves were only a small elite group whose language circulated solely in the official sphere. A. Mnatsakanian goes even further and argues that many of Urartu's rulers were in fact ethnic Armenians.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Suren Ayyvazian has claimed that the Armenian language was transmitted by the Urartian cuneiform.<sup>19</sup> Ayyvazian also identifies the Armenians with the famous Aryans and Hyksos, and claims that they were the inventors of the first alphabet (most scholars would date the codification of the Armenian alphabet to the fifth century AD). Armenian historians have also tended to minimise the extent of Turkic/Azerbaijani settlement in 'historical Armenia', especially in Nagorno-Karabakh, despite widespread evidence that many areas still had a majority Muslim population when they were finally definitively transferred from Iran to tsarist Russia in 1826.<sup>20</sup>

In parallel to the rise of a new generation of Armenian scholars, a new historical school emerged in Azerbaijan after the Second World War,

which insisted that the Turkic languages in general and the Azerbaijani language in particular spread throughout what is now Azerbaijani territory long before the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD (when most Western historians would date their arrival). Moreover, the same historians consciously downplayed the role of the Iranian and north Caucasian languages in the ancient polities of Albania and Atropatena, which were situated on what is now Azerbaijani territory more than one thousand years ago. They accept the well-attested fact that non-Turkic groups inhabited the area in question in the first millennium AD and earlier, but argue that the role of these groups in Azerbaijani ethnogenesis was of secondary or even tertiary importance.

Modern Azerbaijani historians also argue that the Turkic family of languages was always predominant in the region of western Asia, where their use was already widespread by the third to first millennia BC. A. Mamedov, for example, is convinced that the original home of the 'proto-Turkic ethnos' and therefore of *all* the Turkic peoples was in western Asia.<sup>21</sup> Iu. Yusifov has argued that such proto-Turkic groups (in essence proto-Azerbaijanis) helped to establish the Kura–Araxes archaeological culture of the early Bronze Age in Transcaucasia,<sup>22</sup> and that when the Huns arrived in Azerbaijan they were able to mingle with their close relatives. This school of thought identifies the Scythians, Sakas, Sarmatians and Massagetae with local Turkic-speakers,<sup>23</sup> and argues that the Turks were the indigenous inhabitants in western Asia and in Transcaucasia from the third to second millennia BC onwards.<sup>24</sup>

An especially important point of dispute between Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars concerns the status of the ancient Albanians. Armenian historians tended to treat them as barbarous tribes who were partly Armenianised as a natural result of the expansion of Armenia's higher and more civilised culture in the region,<sup>25</sup> whereas Azerbaijani scholars have identified the Albanians as the direct ancestors of modern-day Azerbaijanis and have rejected all theories of their supposed 'Armenianisation'.<sup>26</sup>

The most crucial issue of current Armenian–Azerbaijani controversy, however, involves rival claims to be the true owners of the present-day territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and therefore to be the legitimate heir of the legacy of its ancient population.<sup>27</sup> These disputes became especially sharp after 1988 when the dispute left the confines of academia and was taken up by the mass media, and by open letters and public petition campaigns. Significantly, both of the 'revisionist' historical schools in Armenia and Azerbaijan became closely affiliated with their respective national-democratic movements, Armenian scholars with the Armenian National Movement, and the Azerbaijanis with the Azerbaijani People's Front.<sup>28</sup>

The Armenians place a special value on Nagorno-Karabakh because, after the division of Armenian lands between Russia and Persia in the sixteenth century, it was the one region which preserved an element of autonomy under Armenian princes subordinate to Persia (until 1828). Moreover, during the subsequent period of Russian rule, Nagorno-Karabakh became an area of refuge for many Armenians fleeing from Persia and the Ottoman Empire. As a result, the region, the one common denominator 'homeland' for the Armenians, became a symbol for Armenian unity and consolidation.

On the other hand, the Azerbaijanis consider Nagorno-Karabakh to be the very place where their modern identity emerged under the Muslim khans.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it was the first centre of the Azerbaijani national revival at the turn of the century. Indeed, it could be argued that the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh has itself been the most important factor in stimulating the growth of Azerbaijani national consciousness in the twentieth century.

### **The Georgian–Abkhazian confrontation**

In attempting to understand the role of mythological struggle in the Georgian–Abkhazian case, the following five aspects of the distant past are especially pertinent: the question of who was the first to develop iron production, the origins of local statehood, the dispute over the ethnic composition of the ancient and medieval population of the Colchis Lowland, the question of who founded the Abkhazian Kingdom in the eighth century AD, and finally the manner in which Christianity came to the region.

#### *The origin of iron production*

According to the Georgian version of local history, as developed by the historian Teimuraz Mikeladze,<sup>30</sup> iron was first invented by the Chalibs/Chalds, who occupied north-central Anatolia before the Hittites. Later the Chalibs migrated to the area at the south-east corner of the Black Sea as the ancestors of the Chans (Mingrelians), one of the groups that eventually became in turn the modern Georgian people. Mikeladze argued that these very Chalibs were reported in the Book of Genesis, and that it was they who first supplied the Hittites, the Mittani Kingdom and Ancient Egypt with iron. Mikeladze's argument served two purposes: first, he 'confirmed' the existence of early Georgian tribes across a vast territory of north-western Asia as early as the middle of the second millennium BC (in general Mikeladze assumed that the origins of the proto-Kartvelian –

that is, Georgian<sup>31</sup> – community should be dated to the period before the end of the third millennium BC).<sup>32</sup> Secondly, Mikeladze argued that the Chalibs, as the ancestors of the Georgians, made a massive contribution to human culture by, in effect, introducing the Iron Age.

The Abkhazian version of events was developed in the 1970s by the professional historian Vladislav Ardzinba,<sup>33</sup> who in the early 1990s became the Abkhazian president. He argued that iron was in fact discovered by the ancestors of the Abkhazian–Adyghe peoples who lived in the second millennium BC, just where Mikeladze located the Chalibs and some other ‘Georgian’ tribes.<sup>34</sup>

#### *The origins of local statehood*

Mikeladze also argued that the powerful Kingdom of Colchis (the mythical home of the Golden Fleece) began its existence in western Georgia as early as the middle of the second millennium BC.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he claimed that Colchis was governed by an independent ruler and comprised many large towns with well-developed crafts. According to Mikeladze, this was the key reason restricting Greek colonisation in the region and preventing the Greeks from making a serious impact on the local economic and sociopolitical environment.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Mikeladze attempted to argue that ancient Dioscurias (the modern Abkhazian capital Sukhum, known to Georgians as Sukhumi) was initially a Colchian (i.e. Georgian) city. He therefore insisted that Georgian statehood grew directly out of the Kingdom of Colchis, which survived and developed quite independently on the same territory for almost two millennia (from the twelfth century BC until the sixth century AD). Nobody could subjugate it, neither Assyria, nor Urartu, nor Media, nor Persia. Since the 1970s and 1980s many Georgian scholars have presented this version of the history of Colchis as an incontrovertible truth,<sup>37</sup> a view that has even found its advocates in modern science fiction.<sup>38</sup>

Most Abkhazian historians, on the other hand,<sup>39</sup> cast doubt on the very existence of the Colchis Kingdom, as would most other scholars. The Georgian version was evidently forged with certain political ideas in mind, as will be demonstrated below.

#### *The problem of the population of ancient Colchis*

During recent decades there has been a trend in Georgian scholarship to argue that the ancient population of Colchis, including what is now Abkhazia, was made up entirely of Georgian tribes. More cautious Georgian scholars used to distinguish between two components amongst

the local population of the Colchis Lowland about two thousand years ago, namely the Georgians and the Abkhazians–Adyghes.<sup>40</sup> Even then, however, it was argued that the Abkhazian–Adyghes were highlanders who had only recently moved to the plain,<sup>41</sup> which meant that only Georgians had lived there before.

However, by the 1980s the ethnocentric version became the dominant one in school curricula and in the Georgian mass media. It was first explicitly formulated by the Georgian philologist Pavle Ingorokva,<sup>42</sup> and then developed by historians such as Mikeladze, who went so far as to argue that only Colchians (i.e. ancient Georgians) lived in Dioscurias and on the Black Sea coast in the distant past.<sup>43</sup> Thus, according to Mikeladze, the Colchis Lowland was an ethnically homogeneous and politically integrated territory as early as the middle of the first millennium BC.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the contemporary Georgian historian Marika Lordkipanidze has argued emphatically that only the Georgians were the autochthonous inhabitants of Colchis, and that the ancestors of modern Abkhazians arrived much later.<sup>45</sup> She doubts that the Apsilae and the Abasgoi of the first to second centuries AD, mentioned by classical writers as living on what is now Abkhazian territory, can be considered the ancestors of the modern Abkhazians, and prefers to treat them as if they were Kartvelians (Georgians). In her view, one must distinguish between the local ancient Abkhazians and ‘Apsua’ who arrived later and gave roots to the modern Abkhazians. Thus she is inclined to identify indiscriminately with the Georgians both ancient Abkhazians and some other tribes of ancient Colchis (for instance, Sanigae and Missimians), whose ethnic identity is in reality obscure and is the subject of continuing controversy.<sup>46</sup> Following Ingorokva, she insists that the ancestors of the modern Abkhazians were backward highlanders who reached Abkhazia only in the seventeenth century, when the region was temporarily devastated and ‘cleansed’ of its Georgian inhabitants by Turkish raiders. With these arguments, she is able to present the Georgians as not only the original autochthonous population in Abkhazia, but also the dominant majority from time immemorial.<sup>47</sup>

According to Abkhazian authors, on the other hand, the ancestors of the Abkhazian–Adyghes peoples were the original inhabitants of the whole of north-east Asia Minor and south-west Transcaucasia. It was the Kartvelians who moved to the area much later, pushing the Abkhazian–Adyghes groups to western Transcaucasia.<sup>48</sup> The present Abkhazian president Vladislav Ardzinba frequently repeats these claims in his political rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> The Abkhazian version of events (arguably with more historical support) links the Apsilae and the Abasgoi directly to the



ancient Abkhazian–Adyghe groups: the Apsilae are associated with the Abkhazian self-name ‘Apsua’, and the Abasgoi with the Abazinian self-name ‘Abaza’. The Sanigae and the Missimians are treated as related populations rather than as Kartvelians.<sup>50</sup>

These tribes supposedly ruled the Black Sea littoral up to the modern city of Sukhumi and even further to the south, where they came into contact with the Mingrelians. In other words, it is argued that the Abkhazians already occupied all their modern territory by the first millennium AD. They were therefore the true local inhabitants rather than newcomers, with roots going back at least one and a half to two thousand years and possibly even longer.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Abkhazian historians have used tsarist and Soviet ethnodemographic data to claim that it is only the tremendous changes in the ethnic composition of the area during the last century and a half that have turned the Abkhazians from a natural majority of the population into (before the war of the early 1990s restored their majority status) an artificial minority. Extensive Mingrelian resettlements into Abkhazia took place only in the 1930s–1950s, i.e. during the lifetime of the present generation.<sup>52</sup>

In reaction to Georgian mass media propaganda, in May 1989 the Abkhazians asked a well-known oracle, who lives in a famous cave, to adjudicate on the question of when their ancestors came to settle in Abkhazia.<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, the oracle confirmed that the Abkhazians were indeed the autochthonous inhabitants of their own territory, providing a timely boost to morale in the face of rising Georgian pressure.

#### *On the founders of the Abkhazian Kingdom and its inhabitants*

The main point of controversy between Georgian and Abkhazian historians is the problem of the Abkhazian Kingdom (end of the eighth to the early tenth century AD), in particular the questions of who founded the Kingdom and the ethnic composition of its population. The Abkhazian Kingdom as an independent sovereign state came into being in the 780s as a result of the unification of the earlier principalities of Abkhazia and Egrisi, and their liberation from Byzantine vassalage. The Georgian version of history considers this Kingdom to have been in all key respects ethnically Georgian.<sup>54</sup> As Lordkipanidze puts it, ‘the Abkhazian Kingdom was a Georgian state as regards the vast majority of the population, language, culture, writing system and state policy, and the Abkhazian kings were ethnic Georgians, according to the same data’.<sup>55</sup> For her, the cultural identity of the Abkhazian Kingdom can be demonstrated by the following: the Georgians made up the majority of the

population, the state established its own Georgian episcopate with a Georgian liturgy, thereby turning the Georgian language into the Kingdom's state language, and, finally, several masterpieces of Georgian literature and architecture were created in Abkhazia at this time.

All the population, including both the Georgians and the Abkhazians, were then referred to as 'Abkhazians', but only because of the name of the state (see chapter 2 on similar claims concerning the 'Belarusian-Lithuanian Kingdom'). It is therefore extremely difficult to judge the ethnic identity of the various population segments which were mentioned by medieval authors as resident on Abkhazian territory. Nevertheless, while recognising this fact, Lordkipanidze goes so far as to argue that the terms 'Abkhazia' and 'Abkhazian' stood mainly for 'Georgia' and 'Georgian' both in medieval Georgian and in foreign sources.<sup>56</sup>

Abkhazian authors may agree that the great majority of the Abkhazian Kingdom's population was made up of Kartvelians (Georgians) and that it was therefore at this time that the Georgian language gradually turned into the language of literacy and culture.<sup>57</sup> They may also agree that the term 'Abkhazian' was used in a broad sense at this time, and began to be applied to all the Kingdom's population in western Georgia. Nevertheless, they argue that the population was multiethnic in composition. Moreover, the popularity of the Georgian language amongst the aristocracy, including its Abkhazian element, by no means prevented the commoners from speaking their native Abkhazian language.

Abkhazian authors argue that it was precisely the establishment of the Abkhazian Kingdom that caused the consolidation of the Abkhazian tribes into a cohesive community, which then played the leading role in the life of the Kingdom. From their point of view it is of great importance that the unifier of Abkhazia and the founder of the ruling dynasty, Leon the Second, is referred to in the sources as 'the Abkhazian ruling prince' (*vladietelnii kniaz*). In other words, all these facts are considered in the Abkhazian schema to prove that the first true state on the territory of modern Georgia was founded by the Abkhazians,<sup>58</sup> providing powerful ideological underpinning to the Abkhazian struggle for sovereignty. It is no accident that President Ardzinba refers in his speeches to the ancient Abkhazian state as having been founded 'more than 1,200 years ago'.<sup>59</sup>

From the Georgian side, on the other hand, Lordkipanidze argues that the ethnic identity of the first Abkhazian king is obscure.<sup>60</sup> In her view, the title of 'Abkhazian king' meant only that the dynasty originated from the country of Abkhazia. In fact, Leon the Second could have been of either Greek or Georgian ethnic origin. However, she insists that the kings of the Abkhazians were Georgians in terms of culture and language.

The academic discourse in question demonstrates how ethnocentric attitudes all too glibly furnish definitive answers to obscure problems of the distant past, where modern scholarship has declined judgement given the lack of firm evidence. The dispute over the existence or non-existence of the Kingdom of Colchis is a typical example where the vacuum of evidence has allowed both sides to take up completely incompatible positions.

*The problem of the Christianisation of western Georgia*

In the late 1980s when the atheist communist regime in the USSR was in decline, an identity crisis manifested itself in a strong movement amongst various peoples towards the restoration of their traditional cultures and religions, given the latter's close links with folk cultures. Since the late 1980s Georgian nationalists have attempted to present Georgia as the main stronghold of Christianity in the Caucasus, a Christian island in a hostile Muslim sea. The Georgian mass media and the propaganda of the first informal Georgian political organisations unanimously characterised the Abkhazians as Muslims who were eager to unite with other anti-Georgian forces under the green banner of Islam.<sup>61</sup> Lordkipanidze in particular painted all Abkhazians as the natural enemies of Christianity in western Georgia.<sup>62</sup> This trend towards the radical 'othering' of the Abkhazians became particularly strong under President Gamsakhurdia (1990–2).

In fact the religious situation in Abkhazia is complex: Islam dominates in the north and Orthodoxy in the south, but neither has penetrated deep into folk culture, despite a long history of their development in the area. The core of Abkhazian folk culture still preserves many pagan traditions. Moreover, Georgian accusations that the Abkhazians were anti-Christian have forced the latter to re-evaluate their Christian legacy. In recent years this trend has established a new field of Georgian–Abkhazian confrontation, connected with rival interpretations of the legend of the Christianisation of Georgia by the early Christian missionary St Nino (fourth century AD).

According to the Georgian version, St Nino travelled all over Georgian territory. In contrast, the Abkhazians believe that she arrived in Transcaucasia by sea and first entered the Caucasus in Abkhazia, where she started her missionary activity. In essence the debate focuses on who was baptised first – the Georgians or the Abkhazians.<sup>63</sup> Abkhazian scholars have used this and other myths to present Abkhazia as a country with deep Christian roots dating back to at least the third to fourth centuries AD.<sup>64</sup> During the Georgian–Abkhazian war the Georgian charges had the

paradoxical effect of provoking a movement for the restoration of old Orthodoxy amongst some Abkhazians.

Thus, an ideological struggle between the Georgians and the Abkhazians has been waged: first for cultural supremacy (who was the first to discover iron and to be baptised, whether the Abkhazians had an ancient writing system or not, who erected the old churches in Abkhazia, and what was the ethnic origin of the famous cultural activists of the past);<sup>65</sup> secondly for territorial supremacy (who is indigenous to Abkhazia); and finally for state supremacy (who founded the first state in western Transcaucasia).

For both sides, their particular versions of these myths have helped legitimate their claims to the sole ownership of Abkhazian territory, and have been used as key resources in the local struggle for political power, especially in the early 1990s when the Abkhazian struggle for sovereignty reached its climax. The Georgian–Abkhazian historical dispute therefore has much wider implications, particularly as both sides treat the other's myths as a form of blasphemy. Thus, as Mikhail Chumalov has already noted, the Georgian–Abkhazian war of 1992–3 was preceded by 'an ideological struggle' focusing on different interpretations of the Abkhazian past.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, despite the fragile peace achieved in 1993, each side views the other's case as fundamentally illegitimate, and long-term coexistence will be difficult to maintain.

### **The Georgian–South Ossetian confrontation**

The role of historical myths in dramatising inter-ethnic conflicts is also recognised by South Ossetian authors. As one of them has claimed, 'disagreements [between] powerful contemporary historians, their suppression and falsification of the truth, have led to a dramatic uneasiness between our peoples [the Georgians and the South Ossetians]'.<sup>67</sup> This section will therefore examine the key myths employed by Georgian and South Ossetian authors and compare them with the Georgian–Abkhazian example.

The South Ossetian Autonomous District was established by the Bolsheviks in 1922 on the territory of Shida K'art'li, one of the central provinces of historical Georgia. Georgian authors argue that it was granted to the Ossetians in return for their assistance in the struggle against democratic (Menshevik) Georgia. The Georgian version also interprets this event as a contrivance to favour local separatists, as this territory had never previously been a distinct administrative unit, let alone a separate principality. According to the Georgian version, the Georgians were the original native inhabitants in the region, whereas the first

Ossetian groups settled permanently only after the late thirteenth century AD.<sup>68</sup> The large Ossetian communities in northern Georgia were probably established only in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries,<sup>69</sup> or the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries at the earliest.<sup>70</sup> The most radical contemporary Georgian version of events is that the Ossetians came to Shida K'art'li only in the twentieth century.<sup>71</sup> At the very least, Georgian authors proceed from the supposition that the Ossetian people were formed only in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Obviously, this theory was unlikely to satisfy the South Ossetians, as it deprived them of their autochthonous status. Several Ossetian historians have therefore been working for several decades in the attempt to deepen the Ossetians' roots in Transcaucasia. This problem was first addressed in late 1950s and early 1960s by Iurii Gagloev,<sup>72</sup> who tried to identify the local Dvals of the pre-Mongol era with the Ossetians. As Georgian scholars vehemently attacked this interpretation,<sup>73</sup> Zakharii Vaneev,<sup>74</sup> one of the founders of Ossetian historiography, adopted another approach.

Vaneev sought to establish linguistic and cultural continuity between the Ossetians and the ancient Iranian-speakers of the Eurasian steppes (the Scythians, the Sarmatians and, especially, the Alans), and attempted to trace the migrations of all these nomads to Transcaucasia in the early Iron Age. He even argued that such movements could have started as early as the Bronze Age, in the late second millennium BC. Supposedly, the Cimmerians and the Scythians crossed Transcaucasia from the north to the south in the eighth to seventh centuries BC, and traces of Scythian culture can still be found in South Ossetia and some other areas of Georgia.<sup>75</sup> The next wave of expansion in the Caucasus was identified by Vaneev with the Sarmatians. In his interpretation of the classical authors,<sup>76</sup> in some periods Iranian-speakers accounted for the great majority amongst the highland population of the Caucasus. Moreover, Vaneev argued, the ancient Iranians brought a higher culture to the Caucasus, rather than simply being cruel conquerors and robbers. In his opinion, it was they who made the local inhabitants familiar with iron-working.<sup>77</sup> Vaneev also supported the idea of a local 'Alanian Kingdom', which supposedly emerged even earlier than its Abkhazian counterpart.<sup>78</sup>

By basing his arguments upon his own interpretation of the personal names mentioned in the classical sources, Vaneev claimed to find 'Ossetian chiefs' amongst the first Georgian and Abkhazian princes (sic).<sup>79</sup> Georgian rulers used to recruit Ossetian noblemen as mercenaries, resulting in the resettlement of the Ossetians to Georgia throughout the medieval period.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, in those days the Alans–Ossetians would frequently invade K'art'li (Georgia), driven first by the Mongols, then by Temur (Tamerlane) and finally by the Kabardinians. But this was

only one part of a much longer process of migration.<sup>81</sup> While making no distinction between the Alans and the Sarmatians, Vaneev argued that the latter settled all over the northern Caucasus and made a great contribution to the formation of many local peoples besides the Ossetians.<sup>82</sup> He insisted that it was the Alanian–Sarmatian newcomers who assimilated and Iranianised the local population in the central-northern Caucasus rather than vice versa.

In his view, this process was complete by the first century AD.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the Ossetians are the direct descendants of Alanian migrants rather than Iranianised natives.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, by identifying the Ossetians with the Alans and the Sarmatians, Vaneev sought to provide the Ossetians with deeper roots for a sense of their separate identity and a means of overcoming traditional Georgian claims of cultural superiority.

Thus, Vaneev's schema, which was developed in order to 'restore justice' to the much-debated problems of Ossetian ethnogenesis, was in obvious contradiction to the Georgian version of events. It was no accident that Vaneev's manuscripts, which began addressing these problems in the early 1960s, were first published in South Ossetia only in the late 1980s, after the Georgian authorities had lost control over local scholarship. Undoubtedly, Vaneev's works contributed to the development of the national idea amongst the South Ossetians, which itself resulted in first the growth of a separatist movement and, finally, in the Georgian–South Ossetian war of 1991–2.<sup>85</sup>

These works first rehabilitated the territorial claims of the South Ossetians by insisting on their immemorial roots. Secondly, they reversed traditional stereotypes by arguing that the Ossetians, who had contributed much to the development of Caucasian culture and the formation of many local peoples, were the true 'elder brothers' to the Georgians. Thirdly, they purported to prove that the Alans–Ossetians had enjoyed their own statehood even earlier than the Georgians, thereby legitimising the recent struggle of the South Ossetians for sovereignty. Lastly and arguably most importantly, it was argued that the Ossetians were the direct descendants of ancient Iranian-speakers rather than simply Iranianised natives. This helped to upgrade the status of the Ossetians since, in folk belief, a shift to another language lowers the status of a group.<sup>86</sup>

Vaneev's arguments have been picked up and developed by other South Ossetian authors in recent years. They have demanded the restoration of a 'true' history of the Ossetians, which they identify mainly with the glorious Scythian–Sarmatian and Alanian periods, and have stated openly that 'only the efforts of nationalist-thinking historians can help to restore this history in its completeness'.<sup>87</sup> In their view, the reason for the miserable

conditions of the South Ossetians today lies in 'the haphazard attitude to studies and representation of the people's past, that is profitably used by our opponents who confine us to the small plots of land which [are all that] remain with us from our vast former domains'.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, they insist that the South Ossetians have never been a part of the Georgian people, and that South Ossetia has never previously been included in an independent Georgian state. Moreover, it was South Ossetia (now in Georgia) rather than North Ossetia (now in Russia) that was the historical homeland of the South Ossetians.

South Ossetian scholars have attempted to substantiate these statements by using archaeological and linguistic data as well as written evidence. At a conference on Ossetian history held in Vladikavkaz in 1994, Iurii Gagloity tried to prove that the Sarmatians spread all over the southern slopes of the Great Caucasian ridge in the last centuries BC, and that the great majority of the 'Caucasians' of the central and western Caucasus, mentioned by Strabo, were therefore Iranian-speaking Sarmatians.<sup>89</sup> Iurii Dzitstsoity put forward the idea of the extraordinary antiquity of some Ossetian dialects.<sup>90</sup> He related the Dzhava dialect to the Scythian language and the Yron dialect to the Sarmatian language. Using such arguments, he concluded that the Scythians, the speakers of the Dzhava dialect, settled in southern Ossetia as early as the seventh to sixth centuries BC. On the other hand, the mass migrations to the south since the thirteenth century were carried out by the Yron dialect speakers, from where the development of the modern Tuala and Chisan dialects of South Ossetia began.

Finally, in terms of the struggle for their historical priority on their own territory, the South Ossetians consider the ethnic identification of the Koban archaeological culture (KAC) to be of crucial importance.<sup>91</sup> The culture in question flourished in the central Caucasus between the late Bronze and early Iron Ages (the late second to the first millennium BC). Its close relationships with contemporary sites in the Colchis Lowland are well attested.<sup>92</sup> Until very recently therefore the famous South Ossetian archaeologist Boris Tekhov accepted that the KAC was established by the Kartvelians (i.e. the ancestors of the Georgians) who expanded from the south and mixed with the local north Caucasian inhabitants, whereas the Iranian-speakers arrived somewhat later.<sup>93</sup> Not surprisingly, most Georgian scholars still advocate this view and argue that the ancient Georgians inhabited all of what is now Ossetia long before the arrival of the Ossetians' ancestors.<sup>94</sup>

The growth of inter-ethnic tensions in the Caucasus made Tekhov change his opinion. Since 1987 he has argued that the Indo-Europeans and, especially, Iranians were the autochthonous inhabitants in the Caucasus, especially in its central region.<sup>95</sup> According to his new

concept,<sup>96</sup> the KAC was formed mainly by the Indo-Iranians who came from the north. Rafael Gagloity developed these arguments along the same lines while attempting to trace continuities between the KAC, the Scythians–Sarmatians–Alans and the Ossetians.<sup>97</sup> Vaneev linked the KAC with the local Caucasian tribes from whom the Alans later emerged.<sup>98</sup> This line of reasoning reaches its extreme point amongst some South Ossetian authors who have claimed to find evidence that ‘the ancient Ossetians’ already lived in southern Ossetia in the early Bronze Age, that is, in the third millennium BC.<sup>99</sup> One such author has even sought to prove that close contacts between the Indo-Iranians and the Western Semites were established in the early second millennium BC,<sup>100</sup> allowing him to date the early period of the Ossetian prehistory to the third to early second millennium BC, arguing that at that time they controlled a vast territory comprising the whole of the east European steppe, the Caucasus and all of modern Syria.<sup>101</sup>

In order to demonstrate the unique importance of South Ossetian territory, one of the leaders of the South Ossetian national movement, the historian Alan Chochiiev,<sup>102</sup> argues that its capital Tskhinvali and adjacent areas served as the most important sacred lands for the ancient Aryans, the site of many of their sanctuaries, a place for religious ceremonies, a habitat for martyred heroes and even ‘an Aryan homeland’ since the time of the Koban archaeological culture. Chochiiev hints that it was just here where Jesus Christ learned the wisdom of sacrificial behaviour in his teens and youth.

Whereas Chochiiev confines himself to this hint, two other authors, Valerii Khamitsev and Aleksandr Balaev, claim that the Galileans were Iranian-speaking descendants of the ancient Aryans, ‘the Israeli Scythians’, and that Jesus’ mother was ‘a Scythian’.<sup>103</sup> It follows from this argument that both Jesus Christ and eleven of the Apostles (save Judas) were in fact close relatives of the Ossetians, and that Christianity formed the original core of the culture of ‘the Ossetians, the Alans of the Caucasus’. Thus Galilea is depicted as a land of ‘the Scythians–Alans’. It is also claimed that Georgia was baptised four hundred years later than Ossetia, and that Ossetia, rather than Georgia, was the main original stronghold of Christianity and the bulwark against Islam in the Caucasus. This line of reasoning is also used to legitimate the demand to re-establish an independent ‘Alanian eparchy’ in Ossetia.

Finally, the Ossetians place major stress on the existence of an early independent Alanian state. It is of course of vital importance to them to prove that this state emerged no later than the Abkhazian Kingdom,<sup>104</sup> in order to try to legitimate their political and territorial rights against the similar claims of their neighbours.<sup>105</sup>



Ossetian historical mythology is therefore constructed using the same strategies as the Abkhazians. The Ossetians have attempted to deepen their past on their modern territory, to demonstrate their huge contribution to Caucasian history (the introduction of iron, their contribution to the development of the Alan state, their direct participation in the formation of many groups of Caucasian highlanders) and to mankind in general (the introduction of Christianity). They also stress the existence of early statehood amongst their Alanian ancestors.

The South Ossetian version of the past has its particularities, however. First, in the face of the powerful opposition of Georgian historiography, and lacking in reliable historical evidence, Ossetian authors consciously exaggerate their mythology, lending it fantastic features. The latter include the claims for the earliest adoption of Christianity, for an enormous past territory and for a central place in the Aryan (Indo-Iranian) tradition. Secondly, there is the attempt to combine an association with the glorious deeds of the ancient Iranians (Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans), who were unquestionably newcomers in the Caucasus, with a stress on the Ossetians' autochthonous origin.

This difficult task is accomplished in the following way. It is well established that many Caucasian highland peoples, including the Ossetians, were of heterogeneous origin; that is, both newcomers and local groups participated in their formation. Ossetian authors, however, have tried to maintain their Iranian cultural and linguistic legacy by insisting that their ancestors were also Iranians in blood and that the newcomers assimilated comparatively small groups of the local inhabitants. To prove this, the Ossetians try to pre-date the presence of the ancient Iranians in the Caucasus as far back as the late Bronze Age (the Koban archaeological culture), if not earlier. Once again, this is an explicitly primordial approach; Ossetian authors have identified without any reservation the Ossetians with the Alans, the Sarmatians and even the Scythians.

### Conclusions

Different peoples use similar strategies when searching for historical arguments to legitimate their modern political claims. They attempt to confirm their historical supremacy in the fields of culture (invention of iron-working, creation of the Koban culture, erection of monumental buildings etc.), religion (early adoption of Christianity) and politics (establishment of early statehood). They also try to defend their territorial rights through deepening their roots in a given 'homeland'. At the same time, they associate themselves with the glorious deeds of distant real or imagined ancestors, where possible those mentioned by classical

authors. Identification with the ancient Iranians ('Aryans') has a crucial significance for the Ossetians, and recently the Abkhazians have started to emphasise their distant links with the ancient Hattians, the pre-Hittite population of Asia Minor.

Since all the ancient groups in question originally lived outside the territory of their contemporary descendants or relatives, ethnonationalists tend to date their ancestors' resettlement to the national 'homeland' as early as possible in order to prove their autochthonous roots. Additional claims to linguistic continuity are especially important since it is widely believed that a language is a 'people's soul' and that a shift to another language deprives an ethnic group of its originality and therefore its creativity. This misfortune lowers a people's perceived status, and its political and cultural claims lose their persuasive power.

A stress on the external, so-called objective traits of ethnicity – language, culture, blood – lies at the basis of this sort of argument. It is assumed that archaeological cultures can be identified with modern ethnic groups.<sup>106</sup> However, if any of these 'objective' criteria threaten to contradict the mythology in question, it is unceremoniously dropped, as when Vaneev refused to consider the somatic features and burial rites, which, in his view, were highly unstable and, thus, of subsidiary importance for any study of the Ossetian past.<sup>107</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning that in the opinion of the great majority of experts it is just these traits which are highly persistent.

The historiographical mythologies analysed above do not necessarily move explicitly to the conscious denigration of opponents. Just the opposite: opponents appeal to each other for peace and friendship. However, the assertion of ethnogenetic priority, the complete disregard of opponents' positions and their claims on the local cultural legacy all tend to produce a worsening cycle of accusations of historical falsification and ideological confrontation. In the multiethnic mosaic of Transcaucasia it is practically impossible to construct an ethnocentric version of ethnogenesis without encroaching upon the cultural legacy of neighbouring peoples and, by asserting a prior claim to the 'homeland', placing them in the unequal, inferior position of 'a younger brother'.

Under the hierarchical ethno-administrative structure that was practised in the USSR, the cultural status of any particular ethnic group was strictly connected with its political status, resulting in unequal prospects for further development.<sup>108</sup> Historians from peoples blessed with high administrative status have concentrated on mythical justifications for maintaining that position; historians from peoples lower down the hierarchy have sought to provide arguments to advance their status. Feelings of inferiority have been cited by Abkhazian authors<sup>109</sup> in the face of

Georgian denials of their very existence as a people at the same time as appeals were made for 'peace' and 'friendship'. In 1989 the author was provided with a whole list of Georgian academic literature which was considered 'hostile' by Abkhazian scholars. Curiously enough, even a jubilee encyclopaedic volume devoted to Georgia in which both the Georgian and Abkhazian versions of early history were included (written by Georgii Melikishvili and Marika Lordkipanidze for the Georgian side, and by Zurab Anchabadze for the Abkhazians)<sup>110</sup> was classed by the Abkhazians as an 'anti-Abkhazian' book.

To conclude, it is worth stressing that, although primordial traits such as an ancient common territory, language, religion, blood and cultural legacy can be recently created myths, popular belief in the veracity of such myths establishes propitious conditions for the growth of ethnonationalist movements and in bloody clashes between them.<sup>111</sup> The mythological foundations of mutual antagonism in Transcaucasia will have to be studied with care if lasting peace is to be restored to the region.