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Ethnic Cleansing in Abkhazia: The history of how up to 5,000 civilians were slaughtered & several hundred thousand more displaced in the 1990s

Wartime crimes and population distortions at root of rebel regime's illegitimacy;
return of refugees key to resolving separatist conflicts

I. OVERVIEW

The story of how Georgia's peaceful ethnic mosaic unraveled is a story of a tinderbox set alight by calculated Russian interference. What happened in Abkhazia was not unique: Russia attempted ethnic rebellions in the Baltic states (fomenting Russian speaking minorities), Ukraine (encouraging Crimean separatism), and Moldova (supporting the enclaves of Transdnister and Gagauzia), among other places.

But it was in Abkhazia that the full horror of those policies ran their course.

The conflict that hit the region was as vicious as the ones that shook Yugoslavia. Indeed, measured by its impact on the population, it was much worse. In Yugoslavia, it is estimated that one in eight of the population were forced to flee their homes. In Abkhazia, it was three in four, so fully 75% of the region's pre-war population were killed or chased away.

The world, transfixed by the Yugoslav wars, paid little notice. The savagery of the separatist rebellion backed by Russian regular military, the massacres, the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands hardly merited a headline.

The ignorance of what happened then continues to poison the situation today.

II. THE CONTEXT

Tolerance and mutual acceptance among ethnic groups long have been hallmarks of Georgian society. For centuries, this land peacefully hosted dozens of ethnic groups, including Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Germans, Greeks, Jews, Kurds, Ossetians, Russians, and Ukrainians. These principles, deeply rooted in the past, have remained a cornerstone of modern Georgia's development.

Georgia had enjoyed centuries of independence when, in 1801, Russia illegally abolished its royal court and took over the country. A brief interlude between 1918 and 1921 saw the emergence of the Democratic Republic of Georgia had in 1918, as the country briefly reclaimed its independence. But the young republic fell to the Russian Red Army in 1921. Occupation, mass repressions, and, finally by forceful incorporation into Soviet Russia followed. Thousands of Georgian officers, soldiers, civil servants, and activists of the resistance movement, including those in Abkhazia, were killed by the occupation authorities in the 1920s.

Even under Soviet occupation, Georgia managed to preserve Abkhazia's rights to autonomy for its administrative, cultural and linguistic institutions. Sukhumi, a main regional city, hosted a university teaching in Abkhazian, Georgian, and Russian. The Abkhaz language was taught to all children in elementary schools, and there were Abkhaz-language television and newspapers.

Abkhazia's spectacular location between the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, its mild subtropical climate, its fertile soils and pristine beaches, made it a favorite destination for travelers. Many settled there: Greeks, Armenians, Germans, Jews; later, Russians, Ukrainians, Estonians, and others joined Abkhaz and Georgians to turn Abkhazia into one of the most ethnically and religiously tolerant provinces of the country.

By the beginning of clashes in the region in the 1980s and 1990s, of Abkhazia's 550,000 regional inhabitants, 45% were Georgian; ethnic Abkhaz made up close to 18%, while

ethnic Armenians and Russians each accounted for about 14%; other ethnic groups made up the remaining 8%.

The ethnic Abkhaz enjoyed disproportionate political representation, given that they constituted less than 20% of the population: They made up an absolute majority of the occupants of leading official regional posts, including the top job, that of head of the local communist party.

The tragic story of what happened next starts in the mid-1980s. It was then that, across the Soviet empire, long-suppressed voices of dissent became vocal, demanding freedoms—among which the most potent was the right for those republics occupied and forcefully incorporated into the USSR to restore their independence. Georgia was among these republics, together with the Baltic states and others.

“Many of the Abkhazian troops are actually “volunteers” from Russia, mostly its southern fringes in the Caucasus mountain republics which share the ethnic heritage of the Abkhazians. In exchange for fighting, many were offered homes in Abkhazia after the Georgians were evicted. But some preferred to take their earnings in looted possessions. ‘We do not want to stay here, but we have a right to our trophies,’ said Zhena, a mercenary from the north Caucasus, offering a journalist a stolen bracelet.”

Reuters, October 8, 1993

III. GEARING UP FOR TROUBLE

Troubled in the late 1980s by independence movements throughout its empire, the Kremlin decided to use separatism as a means to thwart Georgia’s secession from the Soviet Union. Moscow therefore threw its full support behind the separatists in Abkhazia.

In March 1989, incited by their political patrons in Moscow, the separatists submitted a petition to the Kremlin asking to secede from Georgia; they explicitly signaled their loyalty to the Communist rule of the Soviet Union. This move was a part of a scenario designed to impede Georgia’s independence aspirations, and prompted mass protests across the country.

The protests in turn fed a burgeoning pro-independence movement that was gathering pace across the country. On April 9, 1989, Soviet troops violently broke up a huge peaceful rally in Tbilisi. They killed 20 civilians, mostly young women.

The flashpoint came in the summer of 1989. It was then that the separatists violently opposed an effort to have the Georgian-language division of trilingual Sukhumi University become a branch of Tbilisi State University. Rallies and counter-rallies in Sukhumi degenerated into open clashes. By the time order was restored in late July, at least 20 had been killed and more than 100 injured, the vast majority of them Georgians.

Two years after the first Sukhumi killings, on March 31, 1991, Georgia held a referendum on independence, following in the footsteps of other former Soviet republics. The referendum was held in the entire country, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Its results were definitive: 93% expressed their preference for an independent Georgia.

In April 1991, Georgia’s democratically elected multi-party parliament declared its independence from the Soviet Union. In October, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created. Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania did not join.

At first, the situation in Abkhazia stayed peaceful. In February 1992, Government forces seconded to protect a crucial railway line connecting Russia, Georgia, and Armenia from attack by looters crossed the region en route to the Russian-Georgian border on the Psou River, and returned to base without incident.

But that July, separatists proclaimed the region’s independence. There was no referendum or plebiscite, and for a good reason: In a province whose wealth was built on multiethnic collaboration, ethnic nationalism was a minority taste. Any referendum would overwhelmingly have rejected independence.

In August, following an agreement between the Government and the separatists, Government forces again entered the region to protect the railways.

"But with the arrival of a helicopter, order broke down and crowds pressed past the armed men, determined to get aboard. One of those left behind in two such landings was Rema Tziziguni, 22, who had given birth to her first child three days earlier. "I am too weak to fight my way through the crowd," she said, sobbing while she nursed her daughter. Five children had died in the camp that morning, and refugees said that bodies lay on the road above and below the meadow. 'I saw 25 bodies, frozen in the snow along the way,' said Filip Paliyani, 75, a retired engineer."

New York Times, October 10, 1993

IV. MASSACRES & ETHNIC CLEANSING, BACKED BY RUSSIA

Fighting in Abkhazia broke out on August 14, 1992, when separatist rebels attacked government forces; a key bridge on the main Tbilisi-Sukhumi highway was blown up. On August 18, rebels fled Sukhumi.

The fighting was brutal, leaving an estimated 6,000 dead by the time a ceasefire was signed in Moscow on September 3, 1992. The first reports to emerge indicated that Chechen, Cossack, and other mercenaries from the Russian North Caucasus were operating alongside the separatist rebels.

The ceasefire committed Government forces to leave the coastal resort of Gagra, which they did, leaving the town defenseless. The ceasefire was then quickly broken by separatist rebels, who attacked Gagra on October 2 with the help of thousands of volunteer paramilitaries—mainly Chechens and Russian Cossacks from the militarized "Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus" (CMPC).

Russia's armed forces—commanded by Deputy Russian Minister of Defense General Kolesnikov—supported this offensive. A Russian navy squadron blockaded the town's harbor; its air force provided support; and a Russian tanker delivered fuel to the rebels.

The non-Abkhaz population of Gagra was massacred or forced into exile. This was a foretaste of things to come. Ethnic cleansing had come to Abkhazia, and its horrors were only just beginning.

In December 1992, rebels started shelling government-held Sukhumi. On March 14, 1993, rebels and their CMPC allies, supported by Russian military aviation, attacked Sukhumi and were beaten back.

Then, on July 2, the separatist mercenaries broke a Russian-brokered ceasefire signed in May, attacking a number of villages strategically located in the hills overlooking Sukhumi.

These villages, predominantly populated by Georgians, witnessed the worst killings prior to the fall of Sukhumi, two months later. On July 9 in Kamani, rebels massacred most of the villagers, including two priests at a local church. Credible reports by the few survivors indicate that the massacre was punctuated by rape and torture.

On July 27, to comply with another Moscow-brokered ceasefire, Government forces withdrew from key areas in and around Sukhumi, leaving behind only a lightly armed garrison.

The endgame started on September 16, 1993, when rebels violated the new ceasefire, launching a massive attack on Sukhumi, a major regional city. Russia reneged on a promise to deploy troops to separate the combatants.

Rebel artillery shelled the city relentlessly. Thousands of rebels and CMPC troops conducted vicious street-by-street fighting, massacring and chasing civilians as they went. A civilian aircraft sent from Tbilisi was attacked as it sought to land. All 125 passengers aboard were killed.

The Russian military supported the attack in numerous ways. Its base at Gudauta was used to shelter separatist leaders. It supplied the rebels with weapons, artillery, and tanks. It

allowed paramilitaries from the Russian North Caucasus to cross the Russia-Georgia border and fight in Abkhazia. And its air force bombed government positions, a tactic that became undeniable after the UN confirmed that a downed SU-27 fighter-bomber was a Russian plane piloted by a Russian pilot. Numerous Georgian and international sources possess indisputable evidence of direct armed support of the rebel side by Russian regular military units.

Sukhumi fell on September 27. The trapped civilian population was massacred; survivors fled for their lives. Television captured scenes of desperation on the city's beaches as civilians climbed over one another to secure passage on one of the few ships sent to evacuate residents. Some made it; most didn't. Many drowned in the mêlée.

A 1994 U.S. State Department report documents the savagery of the war: "The [Abkhaz] separatist forces committed widespread atrocities against the Georgian civilian population, killing many women, children, and elderly, capturing some as hostages and torturing others... they also killed large numbers of Georgian civilians who remained behind in Abkhaz-seized territory.... The separatists launched a reign of terror against the majority Georgian population, although other nationalities also suffered. Chechens and other north Caucasians from the Russian Federation joined local Abkhaz troops in the commission of atrocities... Those fleeing Abkhazia made highly credible claims of atrocities, including the killing of civilians without regard for age or sex. Corpses recovered from Abkhaz-held territory showed signs of extensive torture."

Separatist rebels and their Russian paramilitary allies fanned out across the remainder of region's territory, killing and chasing away any ethnic non-Abkhaz they found.

By the end of September, they controlled most of the region.

Up to five thousand civilians were massacred, while up to 400,000 Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Ukrainians, and moderate Abkhaz were forced to flee, many on foot across snow-clad, high mountain passes. Hundreds more died of exposure and exhaustion.

"For Georgians who were unable to escape from Sukhumi, the situation for the last week or so has been terrifying. 'Several of my Georgian neighbours were killed by Abkhazians looking for new homes' said a doctor. One Georgian woman added: 'My husband was shot dead in our bedroom three days after Sukhumi fell. Armed men - I know they were Abkhazians - told me to get out. They said Georgians were no longer wanted.' We spent two nights in Sukhumi. The gunfire after dark rarely stopped. The head of the UN military observer mission in Abkhazia, Brigadier-General John Hvidegaard, made it clear that human rights abuses were being committed against the Georgian population. 'One night I heard four hours of shooting, and women screaming in a block of flats nearby. Men were shouting that they would execute all non-Abkhazians,' he said."

The Guardian, October 7, 1993

V. UNSTABLE AFTERMATH

In April 1994, Georgia, separatist rebels, Russia, and the UN signed a framework agreement on IDP repatriation and measures for a political settlement of the conflict. Several months later, after a lack of progress in IDP return, a quota system for the return of IDPs was agreed upon during emergency talks.

In December 1994, an OSCE declaration denouncing the ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia was adopted at the organization's Budapest summit. The OSCE repeated this denunciation at its December 1996 Lisbon summit, as well as at the November 1999 Istanbul summit.

The General Assembly of the United Nations—through its May 15, 2008, resolution—condemned the ethnic cleansing and called for a stop to "any attempts to alter the pre-conflict demographic composition" in the region.

On the ground, only the Gali district has seen a few IDPs return spontaneously. Several thousand trickled back and remain in the area under constant threat of arbitrary prosecution

and expulsion. Russian “peacekeepers” either turn a blind eye to their plight, or directly encourage their abuse and intimidation.

VI. THE SITUATION TODAY

The region’s economy is moribund; its remaining population depleted by the clashes; the result is a lush landscape disfigured by dozens of ghost villages and destroyed cities, with hundreds of streets and houses left to crumble to weed-infested ruins.

Those few Georgians who managed to trickle back to their homes are being deprived of fundamental human rights, including basic security, the right to study their mother tongue in schools, or even to speak Georgian in public places.

Since 2002, Russia had been issuing Russian passports to the remaining residents of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is illegal under both Georgian and international law; nevertheless, the Russian government is using this manufactured citizenship as a smokescreen for its aggressive designs against Georgia, claiming to be motivated solely by a “desire to protect its own citizens.”

Russia perceived NATO’s postponement of MAP as a signal of the failure of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. As such, Moscow now has unveiled its real intentions towards its neighbor by attempting to take full military control over a part of its territory through the illegal deployment of extra troops and heavy armament. This militarized onslaught is supplemented by a simultaneous process of full-scale bureaucratic annexation of the province into Russia.