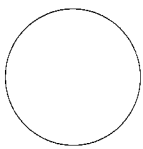
STORM OVER THE CAUCASUS

IN THE WAKE OF INDEPENDENCE

Charles van der Leeuw



CURZON
CAUCASUS WORLD

CAUCASUS WORLD

First published in the UK in 1999
by Curzon Press
15 The Quadrant, Richmond
Surrey TW9 1BP
England

Typeset and designed by Nicholas Awde/Desert♥Hearts
Covers & maps by Nick Awde

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Bookcraft, Midsomer Norton, Avon

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7007 1116 3

Contents

PEOPLES OF THE CAUCASUS
— AT A GLANCE —

11
War in the mini-empire

There are two Batumis: the sprawling city area on the other side of the railway station where the railtrack from Tbilisi ends, and the coastal strip west of the port where the villas and big hotels are situated. The largest, the Medea Hotel, is filled with refugees from Abkhazia, as is one wing of the pompous Intourist Hotel, built in Stalinist style.

Batumi is the capital of Ajaria, the only remaining autonomous state of Georgia which distinguishes itself from the rest of the 'mini-empire' by its Muslim majority as well as by the fact that during the 18th century and for some periods subsequent once formed part of the Ottoman Empire. The same happens to be true for nearby Samtskhe which, however, has not been provided with autonomous status in later times. In neither area, however, did the the virus of separatism appear to be in the air.

"We are Georgians, I say," stressed Irakli, the young press spokesman for Ajaria's head of state Aslan Abashidze, "and I daresay we're better Georgians than those who set the rules in Tbilisi at the moment!"

His chief Abashidze was himself shortly afterwards to outline to me the ambitious plans he had in store for his autonomous state: expansion of the port, the establishment of a free-trade zone, overall protection of the banking sector and a fully open investment regime. "You'll see how by the end of this century Batumi will be the Gibraltar of the Black Sea!" he declared. "Look for yourself, even now nobody has to worry here. Here in Batumi you can walk the streets in the evening with two, three thousand dollars in your pocket and nobody, I say nobody, will even point a finger at you!"

The last remark proved to be true — absolutely. Batumi has always been my ideal stop-over to and from the way home. Even if the city had its worries (although nowhere near the levels faced by the rest of Georgia) over electricity supplies and how the population could make ends meet, Ajaria

remained an oasis of peace in a country where turbulence had become routine. "There are quite a lot of . . . let us say, certain individuals who would love to have their tanks roll through the streets of Batumi," Abashidze would say. "But they won't have their way — we won't give in to provocation!"

Abashidze's persistence has nonetheless equipped him with a number of no less persistent political opponents in the street. In May 1991, for example, when he was in the middle of a meeting in his own office, a terrorist group burst into the building and opened fire randomly at those in the chamber. Two were killed and the president was seriously wounded but survived. Two weeks after the event, seven kilos of high explosives were found and neutralised near his apartment on the port boulevard.

Abashidze's political opponents, who claim only loose ties with Tbilisi, were united in the Republican Party which occupies a scattering of seats in the local assembly. In March 1993 it looked for a moment as if things might get out of hand as on the 15th a bomb went off in front of the house of the Republican leader Davit Berdzenishvili — followed, two days later, by the kidnapping of his fellow activist Tamaz Diasamidze. The perpetrators were captured and sentenced, but this did not stop a mob from gathering which, on the 28th, stormed the party building and smashed up its interior.

But this was hardly the limit of the dangers Abashidze had to take into account. A year after these events, the head of the local police at the time, Ali Bakuridze, discovered a plot by one of the most prestigious families in the area, the Asanidzes, to stage a coup against Abashidze.

"Behind the Republicans hide the Russians," the more or less official comment in Abashidze's red carpet lobby could be heard, "whereas behind the Asanidze one could detect, let us say, certain elements who want to turn Georgia into a right-wing totalitarian state."

As it was, Bakuridze himself came to fall into disgrace and take a one-way ticket to Moscow in spring 1995 for unexplained reasons. Whatever the case, such episodes — minor in comparison to the dramatic events taking place at the same time in the rest of Georgia — failed to undermine Ajaria's status as an oasis of calm — whether the "certain elements" hinted at by Abashidze liked it or not.

The same, however, could certainly not be said of Georgia's two other cut-off regions. In South Ossetia, the struggle was comparatively brief if severe. The rift started in 1987 with petitions from South Ossetians to the Kremlin for 'reunification' with their brethren across the border in North Ossetia. In 1989 the word 'border correction' makes way for 'independence' and by autumn 1990 the South Ossetians had elected their own local parliament

while the local Soviet assembly still remained intact. After a lengthy silence, the Kremlin eventually promised to install a committee to study the case, in the meantime, all decisions taken in both Tbilisi and the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali over the issue were declared 'void'. In Tbilisi, however, the reaction of the Georgian government proved to be more substantial although hardly any wiser: South Ossetia's autonomy was henceforth 'suspended'.

Whether this was coincidence or not, things getting out of hand in South Ossetia neatly coincided with the rise in Georgia of Kitovani, Ioseliani and Gamsakhurdia and the decline of the grip of the authorities in general. On Christmas 1990, two of Gamsakhurdia's bodyguards were assassinated there. On January 6th the Georgian Soviet voted — in fact, ordered to do so by Gamsakhurdia — in favour of the "absolute abolition" of South Ossetia's autonomous status.

"We knew that this was a somewhat less than wise thing to do," one of the deputies was to tell me later. "But his mind was already rather wandering by that time. During the vote, there were armed guards at the doors, their gun barrels turned inward."

Meanwhile, in Tskhinvali far more had been more going on than people were led to believe.

"Days before the vote, warnings had come to us that bad things were going to happen," a Georgian from Ossetia, eking out a miserable existence in a draughty refugee centre in Tbilisi, told me. "Word came that the Red Army was moving into the area. If nothing else, they were going to create a blood bath that would dwarf the events of 1989 in Tbilisi. We somehow managed to get weapons ourselves. As the tanks moved into town, there was complete pandemonium. It was hard to distinguish friend from foe. The local mafiosi used the occasion to get even — this I know for sure. Since it was clear that the invaders had no idea of the way around town we became more and more convinced that they were Russians. It was only later that we overheard them talking to each other in Georgian. We watched them looting houses and shops. It was then it began to dawn on us that they were from Tbilisi . . . a thought we had confirmed later when they slunk off in the evening. The Red Army would never slink off."

Officially, twenty killed and about a hundred injured were reported a day after the onslaught.

"That's impossible!" claim Ossete and Georgian survivors alike. "That day and during the following days at least fifty farms in the area were attacked and their occupants massacred."

It is conjectured that the plan was to occupy Tskhinvali and use it as a base to systematically 'cleanse' the whole region. But few ethnic Ossetes inhabited the autonomous capital in those days, and the invaders had not

counted on such united resistance by the rest of the population. The message was clear: Gamsakhurdia's intervention in Ossetia was unwelcome, period.

The Ossetes, however, proved themselves little grateful for the initial support granted to them by their Georgian compatriots. On arriving in Tbilisi a few weeks later, the leader of the South Ossetian Unity Movement Torez Gulumbekov bluntly informed government officials that the "Ossetian Nation" had decided to "reunite its territory" and that he had come to negotiate "a solution to the problem of ethnic Georgians who still lived in the area." The result was that he was thrown in jail where he remained until after Gamsakhurdia's downfall.

Soon after the attacks and the subsequent talks both sides dug themselves in and the towns and settlements on both sides of the line were harried by regular exchanges of artillery bombardments. The provisional government which had taken over in Tskhinvali after Gulumbekov's detention at first imprisoned every ethnic Georgian politician and official it could lay its hands on, eventually packing them up and dispatching them across the border in the company of thousands of their lesser compatriots. As they saw it, they were simply doing exactly the same as Gamsakhurdia would have done to them had he been given the chance.

Over the first few months of 1992, Gia Karkarishvili, a crony of Kitovani's who was his 'junior defence minister', made several attempts to breach the Ossetian lines using military force. On April 26th, the Russian garrison of 6,000 interior troops was evacuated from South Ossetia — much to the consternation of the governments of the since returned Gulumbekov, since only 300 men were left behind with strict orders not to shoot unless they were attacked themselves and to refrain from any interference in local conflicts.

This move gave the Georgian armed forces the perfect chance to recover their positions — or at least this is what they thought. In the afternoon of May 14th — mere hours after a friendly visit by Shevardnadze to Tskhinvali that morning — Karkarishvili's men entered the village of Pris, set all 72 houses ablaze, mostly with the inhabitants still in them, and shot at anyone trying to escape. On May 26th, a convoy of lorries carrying refugees leaving the capital heading north came under fire in an ambush, which left 36 killed and 18 seriously wounded.

Naturally, there were the odd international interludes. Earlier, on May 22nd, Tskhinvali had a strange guest in the form of the Belgian politician Marc Eyskens, there on behalf of the ubiquitous Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe — the same organisation whose representatives were to blunder their way through Azerbaijan in later days. Eysens talked, listened, had lunch, talked, listened, had dinner, and then was back on his

way. The dust had barely settled when the guns started firing again. On May 28th, a ceasefire was declared — said to be the result of 'mediation' by a Russian parliamentary delegation who had visited Tbilisi and Tskhinvali two days earlier. The following day, Tskhinvali was subjected to the worst ever shelling since the beginning of the siege.

Meanwhile, Tskhinvali was packed with Ossetes whose villages and settlements surrounding the capital had been cleansed and whose dwellings were now occupied by Georgians who had fled Tskhinvali in their turn. More than a few 'silent barters' were concluded as Georgians who lived too near the frontline occupied the farms abandoned by Ossetians who in their turn squatted houses in Tskhinvali previously occupied by Georgians.

Early that summer, the number of the slain on the Ossetian side alone had risen to over 800 and the number of seriously injured over 2,000, while 150 Ossetes were still in Georgian detention centres and at least one more thousand missing. All negotiation attempts were now to end in an endless series of multi-interpretable deals and 'misunderstandings' — and in fresh violence as well. As it was, none of the parties knew what they wanted — except for that third party: the Kremlin. But then, in Russia they had time and patience enough to wait until South Ossetia fell into their hands like a ripe apple.

The deadlock dragged on like this until spring 1993, when Shevardnadze accepted a Russian sponsored 'peace proposal' by which Russian troops were to supervise maintaining the status quo until a political compromise between the conflicting parties could be implemented.

"The Russians have, to put it bluntly, taken the area for themselves," confided MPs in Tbilisi. "And this makes it perfectly clear who was originally behind the double murder of Gamsakhurdia's men that started off the whole thing."

In summer 1996 the ruins of the former Jewish quarter of Tskhinvali, where the most dramatic fighting in 1992 had taken place, had already been covered with weeds for a long time. The self-elected parliament was a year away from the end of its first term, as was its president Ludvig Chibirov, the former rector of the town's university. Tskhinvali still had the look of a rambling provinical town than a sovereign republic's capital. The only building more than three storeys high was the 'government house' where a number of ministries were clumped together, the neighbouring building houses the parliament, the offices of the head of state and prime minister, and the foreign ministry. Most of the offices were locked and those which were open showed rows of empty desks.

That summer afternoon, around the time the head of state had

promised me an interview, a luxurious four-wheel drive car with a Russian number plate entered the parking lot. After a brief discussion, this 'Russian delegation' then left for Vladikavkaz, the North Ossetian capital, carrying Chibirov along with them.

One OSCE official who happened to be there along with me, muttered: "So I don't think there's any doubt who's really in charge here."

"Incorporation into the Russian Federation is the wish of every living soul here," a presidential adviser speaking on behalf of his superior assured me, "even though reality will in all likelihood require us to end up in some federative relationship with Georgia. But we will only agree to that provided not only Shevardnadze but the international community as well fully guarantees us home rule. Heads of state come and go, and who can reassure us that one day a second Gamsakhurdia isn't going to step forward?"

As for the Russians, the Ossetian crisis was amplified by yet another, highly inconvenient dimension after October 1992, when, sparked by a string of incidents, street-fighting broke out in Vladikavkaz between Ossetes and Ingush. The Ingush are an Islamic Caucasian mountain people who, after the downfall of the USSR, broke away from their cousins the Chechens, with whom they were united under the banner of Chechen-Ingushetia, and joined the new Russian Federation as a separate unit. Ever since, they have been claiming as their homeland the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz (or parts of it at least) and its eastern hinterland, where many Ingush are concentrated.

Needless to say, the Ingush are not very numerous: in 1943 they were accused by Stalin, along with among others such as the Chechens, of sympathy for the German invaders and en masse deported to Central Asia. As opposed to other mountain peoples, the Ingush managed to adapt rather well to their new environment and under Nikita Khruschev's subsequent 'rehabilitation' less than half of their number returned to the Caucasus. The Ingush feel themselves the pariahs of the New Russia — they have no real homeland but at the same time are denied the right to settle down elsewhere in the Russian Federation.

The clashes in Vladikavkaz soon got out of control as rumours rapidly spread that the Ossetes were busy "exterminating the Ingush." Despite the previous rift with Ingushetia, in Grozny the Chechen leader Dudayev appealed for help on behlaf of his Islamic brother nation in distress, and by the end of October an unruly but heavily armed fighting force crossed the border under the banner of the Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Nations, led by the Circassian Mussa Shanibov. In order to foil any attempt at a siege or, conceivably, a direct attack on Vladikavkaz, a Russian parachute unit landed at the edge of the city on Saturday October 31st,

dispersing the attackers and disarming a part of them. The days that followed were days of sweet revenge for the Ossetes as, with the assistance of police units (and, according to the Ingush, of the Russian military), they butchered hundreds of Ingush and drove thousands more from the city. Once more the Oriental Christians had made a doubtful display of force — after the Lebanese Maronite, the Serb and the Armenian, the Ossete too could now boast of having made a stand against the 'Islamic threat' by the most radical means. And by the time the sky was clear of the last trace of gunsmoke in North Ossetia, it had to be admitted in Tbilisi, albeit reluctantly, that the chances now of ever recovering South Ossetia on its side of the border were looking a trifle bleak. Ominously, however, all was not deadlock and the warlords and their legions in arms were soon to get a new playground for their crusades.

The drama of Abkhazia is significantly older than the times it started making front page headlines. The Abkhazians have been Caucasians as far back in time as human memory goes. Like their neighbours to the north, the Circassians, they claim to be descendants from both the Scyths and the Amazons. In the early Middle Ages the Abkhazian kingdom was at its apogee, extending over all of the central Caucasus, it included present north-west Azerbaijan. Eventually the Abkhazians were pushed back east by the Alans, the present day Ossetes.

After the withdrawal in 1810 by Ottoman troops of the Caucasian Black Sea coast, the area was was occupied by the Russians. During the Turco-Russian war that raged in the early 19th century, the Abkhazians had hesitantly taken sides with the Russians. On the eve of peace they requested the formation of a Russian protectorate — which was duly granted. Until 1829, the political status of Abkhazia remained uncertain as long as the Sublime Porte continued to claim its erstwhile territory. A new war was averted for the time being by the Treaty of Adrianopole which granted the Russians control over the entire eastern Black Sea coast except for Batumi.

Russian rule triggered off fresh revolts, which made the Russians decide to chase over a hundred thousand Abkhazians across the Turkish border over the next decade and some three hundred thousand of them after the establishment of their authority over the country's inland areas. Then, in 1840, a series of uprisings in the North-Western Caucasus broke out conducted by the Ubykh leader Hajji Berzek, which spread rapidly and were to last until 1845. The final attempt to get rid of the Russians took place between 1857 and 1864, ending with a peace treaty signed with General Heiman, acting on behalf of the Russian commander-in-chief Prince Mikhail Vorontsov. The treaty coincided with the same mass ethnic

cleansings that had ravaged the other North Caucasian nations five years earlier. It is estimated that between 1859 and 1867 between 1.5 and 2 million people were deported from the West and Central Caucasus after which Cossack and Russian colonists were brought in to occupy the empty villages and settlements. It was then that loyal Georgian landowners who had been deprived of their properties by the Russians earlier and had failed to regain them, were compensated for their losses in Abkhazia.

As for present-day Abkhazia, according to the 1989 census, it numbered just over half a million inhabitants, almost half of whom were ethnic Georgians/Mingrelians and the remainder a mixture of Russians, Greeks and Armenians. Abkhazians numbered less than 100,000 in their own land. The country had been an independent Soviet republic until, by a decree of Stalin in 1931, it was forced to join Georgia as an autonomous unit.

By early 1978, violence had broken out in the streets of Sukhumi after it was reported that Abkhazian delegates in the Supreme Soviet in Moscow had urged the ailing Brezhnev to reincorporate Abkhazia into the Russian Federation. Not much is on record about the riots, since officially they never took place — testament to the ever-amazing ease by which Soviet chroniclers decided that whatever conflicted with party interests simply never happened. Eyewitnesses to the Sukhumi disturbances to this day claim that the police took action only against Georgians, leaving the Abkhazians and Russians free to run riot. Whatever the case, the incident remained without political consequences.

In 1991, during the conflict with South Ossetia, Abkhazia had remained on the sidelines. In spring 1992, when in all the former Soviet domains the future status of the defunct Red Army's military facilities and materiel was under formal discussion, Shevardnadze agreed with the Abkhazian leadership that they were to supervise all armed units on their territory, although ultimate responsibility for the country's joint defence would remain in the hands of the defence minister in Tbilisi. Unfortunately, that minister happened to be Tengiz Kitovani, who considered his role to be somewhat more than purely ceremonial and administrative.

A revolt then took place in the north of Mingrelia, where the corridor between Gali and Zugdidi was occupied by the 'Zviadists', supporters of the deposed Gamsakhurdia. They had kidnapped Shevardnadze's envoy Sandro Kavsadze (later to be chairman of the State Committee for Human Rights), and the situation gave Kitovani precisely the pretext he required to make his move. What was about to happen makes accusations made later that he negotiated secretly with the Zviadists behind Shevardnadze's back — especially with Gamsakhurdia's old crony Loti Kobalia, who was now the president in exile's military supreme commander — not entirely stripped of logic.

Little had been done about Kavsadze's kidnapping. Attempts to free the hostage foundered because of Shevardnadze's refusal to make concessions — which he nonetheless did by proclaiming, on August 4th, a general amnesty in Georgia excluding those sentenced for murder. Indeed, on the one day all political prisoners were free men again. The hostage, hwoever, still remained under lock and key.

On the evening of August 11th, the Georgian interior minister Roman Gensadze and Shevardnadze's personal adviser and confidant Davit Salaridze arrived in Zugdidi. Together with their host, the governor of the province Otar Patsatsia (later rewarded by Shevardnadze for his loyalty with the post of prime minister after Tengiz Sigua's dismissal), they drove to a house which belonged to one of Gamsakhurdia's 'personal friends and counsellors'. Once they had entered, they heard vehicles outside. Shots were fired and suddenly they realised that their armed escort was under attack by around hundred militiamen — Chechens, as the three were to later claim. Resistance proved futile, and within a short time the delegation was bundled into an army vehicle which took them to a settlement near Gali where Vakhtang Kobalia was waiting for them. The crucial point of whether or not Gamsakhurdia himself was present is something over which the various accounts disagree.

It could be argued that the events sparked by these two senseless abductions made a solid contribution to what could well have become the most serious international stand-off since the Cuban Crisis of 1963. On August 14th, Kitovani was ordered to march on Gali with a thousand or so armed national guards with the aim of liberating the prisoners — by force if need be. But he never reached his target, since the hostages were released shortly afterwards unharmed. But there was no stopping this patriotic hero, whose career had started as a street-gang leader, then plotter against the state, ending up as the country's defence minister. He made a bee-line for for Sukhumi at the head of not one but three thousand paramilitary troops, armed to the teeth and supported by tanks and heavy artillery. Fierce resistance by local interior troops could not prevent Kitovani's National Guard from taking control of the city within 24 hours. Massacre, abduction and looting followed.

Shevardnadze was plunged into a state of grave embarrasment, to say the least, and he immediately had security chief Ioseliani and prime-minister Sigua flown over to Sukhumi to straighten things out. On August 17th, both parties agreed to a ceasefire, including a commitment to withdraw the Guards from the city within 24 hours. Instead, Kitovani stormed the local Parliament Building early next morning, sending cabinet ministers and people's representatives fleeing — literally and figuratively speaking — through the back door further up the coast to Gudauta, where

independence was proclaimed and a government formed. Meanwhile, Moscow had started the evacuation of all Russian citizens trapped in Sukhumi — a operation which was put in jeopardy when on August 20th fighting flared up again between Kitovani's Guards who were terrorising the area and re-entering Abkhazian troops — the latter supported by Cossacks, other (North) Caucasians and even a unit of Turkish volunteers who had hastily moved in.

This time it was not only Shevardnadze who faced extreme embarrassment. The same can be said of Boris Yeltsin, who found himself caught in the cross-fire of a major political row at home. Among the hawks were vice prime-minister George Khiza, foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev and Parliament's factotum Sergey Baburin, whose extremist views veered significantly close to those of the notorious ultra-nationalist MP Zhirinovsky. Whilst publicly shedding crocodile's tears over the Armenians in Azerbaijan and the Abkhazians and Ossetes in Georgia, these politicians were out for one thing only: to provoke an all-out regional conflict in Transcaucasia with the final aim of rolling the Russian border forward again to the banks of the River Arax.

In reality, the spectre of total war in Transcaucasia was far less imaginary than it would seem — certainly when compared with how the situation was viewed in the West, or rather *not* viewed due to total indifference. Nevertheless, further along the coast, the Ukraine was witnessing an ever more heated row that escalated over status of the Crimea and control of the Black Sea fleet. Kiev had already made repeated warnings to the Kremlin that in the event of direct armed intervention in Georgia it would occupy the Crimea and come to Georgia's aid — in fact, units of the Ukrainian National Defence Force had already fought on the Georgians' side since the first fighting in Sukhumi.

The plan as set out by the Russian warmongers was simple: occupy the road linking Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz, have marines land in both Poti and Baku and from there march on and reoccupy Abkhazia, the former Soviet base near Ganja, in Azerbaijan, and the autonomous Nakhchivan. The most unequivocal broadside came from Ankara, who pointed to the treaty signed in the aftermath of the Second World War and ratified by the Warsaw Pact, NATO and the United Nations, which guaranteed an open border between Nakhchivan and Turkey as well as the region's integrity. Briefly stated: taking Nakhchivan by force would mean war between Russia and Turkey since any action taken within its existing borders without Ankara's prior consent violated the agreement. Thus, Turgut Özal's message to Moscow and Yerevan was clear: hands off.

It is conceivable that Yeltsin and defence minister Grachov might have ventured on a military campaign against the Ukraine. But waging war on

Turkey and thereby on NATO would surely have meant the end of both the CIS and the Russian Federation — even if the Americans had avoided becoming embroiled in the conflict, torn as they would have been between supporting the Turks, as they were legally bound, and cherishing their old-time sentiments towards the Armenians — and this the pair realised all too well. Just how American pressure made Yeltsin call off a mass intervention is not known. However, it is not difficult to conclude that any such intervention would have taken the situation in Abkhazia from bad to worse.

Averting a Russian invasion hardly meant that Abkhazia's troubles were over. In late September, four thousand heavily armed troops consisting of Abkhazian, Caucasian, Turkish, Arab and Iranian volunteers moved against the occupied city of Gagra, on the coast near the border with Russia. On October 3rd, the city fell, despite fierce resistance by the same Gia Karkarishvili who had been responsible for the chaos in Tskhinvali — after his promotion to defence minister as Kitovani's successor, he was sacked again and ended up exiled in Moscow, crippled for life after being shot by snipers. During the fighting, some 300 of Karkarishvili's men were reported killed.

The same day that Gagra fell, the Abkhazians began shelling Sukhumi, which was to become a daily routine all winter for those who were left behind, as they would be for such other localities as Adzinbzha, Kindgi, Tamysh and Chartveli, which were situated on the other side of the Georgian-Abkhazian frontline — both sides were busy bombarding each other. One of the Georgian side's favourite targets was Eshera, where Russian troops were still stationed and the site, according to the Russians, of an important military research and development laboratory still in operation. On November 2nd, unexpectedly heavy shelling destroyed all the supply systems of power and drinking water in Sukhumi. This was a winter to be forever etched in the inhabitants' memories.

"As I see it, it wouldn't have been too difficult to repair the systems," recalls one woman who had sent her children to Tbilisi but herself remained until the bitter end. "But it simply wasn't done. We were told that we were in a state of liberty and legitimately lived on Georgian territory. But there wasn't a hint of the Georgian government anywhere. The only thing visible to us were the stuck-up, pathetic parades of the militias belonging to Ioseliani and Kitovani.

"The shops were overflowing with stolen stuff: furniture, luxury goods, medicine and food parcels with the Red Cross labels still on them. Everything, including bread, was exorbitantly expensive. Anyone who wanted to get out to anywhere safer had to pay heaps of money to get through the roadblocks — anyone who went and simply tried his luck was sent back just as simply. Nothing was done to defend the city — nothing.

Those brave fighters were always the first to dive into the basements the second the first shots were heard. Each week students and other youngsters were recruited, most of them by force, and sent off to the front line. They were told they wouldn't have to fight, only to stand guard . . . but as far as I know, less than half of them ever came back, pure cannon fodder."

Meanwhile, the ever enigmatic Caucasian Mountain Confederation had garnered so much support that they now reckoned themselves powerful enough to break through the Georgian lines. A first attempt on January 5th was to fail. A second on March 2nd saw the town of Labra (Ochantir) fall into the Abkhazians' hands, together with a number of strategic positions to the north east of the district of Sukhumi, which made the city itself a sitting duck.

That winter, the 'neo-imperialistic' dream of Yeltsin's opponents drew as close to reality as it was ever to come. As the fighting escalated, the risk of the Russians becoming involved in the conflict directly and up to their ears was very real indeed — a risk they took with every thought for the calamitous consequences, according to the vast majority of the Georgian public, a vociferous minority headed by Shevardnadze insisting the contrary.

The events now fell into place fast and furious. On December 3rd, a Georgian foray out of Sukhumi resulted in the temporary recapture of Labra and Tamysh. Three days later, on December 6th, Russian commanders threatened Sukhumi with air raids. On December 14th, a Russian helicopter loaded with 'relief goods' was shot down near Charkveli. Shortly afterwards, Grachov appointed General Victor Solokin 'Supreme Commander of West Transcaucasia'. The move was political rather than military: Solokin, after all, was no less than the Butcher of Tbilisi under whose command Soviet troops had committed their atrocities in the Georgian capital in April 1989.

By the end of December, the Abkhazian leader Zurab Achba launched a recruitment drive among those Russians who had been hounded from their homes by the Georgians. During the month of January, a shady political game began to be played in and around the battle arena. On January 12th, Kitovani met Grachov in secret. Two weeks later, Shevardnadze and a Russian delegation agreed in Tbilisi that January 1st 1996 would be the final deadline to end all Russian military presence on Georgian territory. On February 20th, residential areas of Sukhumi were strafed by Russian aircraft, leaving dozens killed and hundreds wounded. Off the Russian port of Sochi, Georgian fishing boats were seized by Russian coastguards.

The same day, Grachov publicly declared that both Ajaria and Abkhazia

"are zones of strategic interest" for Russia and flatly denied the existence of any agreement with respect to the withdrawal of Russian troops. As for the air raids on Sukhumi, he ludicrously claimed that the aircraft in question were in fact Georgian planes with fake Russian markings painted on them.

In Tbilisi, a political storm broke out.

"I was beside myself," Irina Chanturia-Sarishvili was to recall. "But at the same time I felt satisfied in one way or another when I heard Shevardnadze admit: 'It seems the opposition's opinion concerning the role played by the Russians in the conflict is far from unfounded.' In fact, it looked for a while that some comprehension of the facts behind the Abkhazian conflict had finally got into his thick skull, that it was a string of deliberate Russian provocations leading to them trampling all over Georgia, just as they had twice already done in the past. Unfortunately, this insight of his proved to be short-lived."

As it would appear. On February 24th, the Georgian Parliament voted with an overrwhelming majority in favour of a resolution calling for immediate withdrawal of "all foreign military personnel" from Georgian territory. At first, Shevardnadze declared himself "sympathetic." Subsequently, he spoke of his "regret" over the latest events of recent months. But the resolution was to remain a signed sheet of paper, nothing more.

Three days later Grachov, accompanied like a movie star by a train of reporters and cameramen, went on a whistle-stop tour of Batumi and Sukhumi.

In Batumi, people still vividly remember the spectacle: "He was wandering around with a group of officers and every time he spotted a camera or a microphone he'd blare out that no one in the whole wide world would ever dare interfere with the movements of the Russian Army. We were under the strong impression that these gentlemen were far from sober."

"At that moment, we were as close as we ever were to a solution," members of Shevardnadze's entourage were to claim later, "since the Abkhazian side was prepared to stop its attacks on Sukhumi in exchange for special status within the Georgian republic. The displaced persons on both sides would have been allowed to return to their homes. A joint Georgian-Abkhazian force would supervise the peace operation. After that, the original agreement of 1992 would be implemented."

So everyone appeared to be satisfied. Except, of course, for Kitovani and Ioseliani who feared that this turn of events would deprive them of the pretext they had long nurtured to justify the existence of their respective armed units, which in Tbilisi and large parts of the rest of the country had taken control of the streets and, most importantly, the black market. For

their part, the Russians, ever wary they would be ousted from the scene, were most interested in continuation of the conflict until they themselves were in a position to move in as keepers of the peace — at gunpoint.

To show he meant business with his various declarations, on February 24th, Grachov had the Russian planes raid Sukhumi on a daily basis between March 11th-16th. Initially, he claimed as he had done before that the aircraft were "repainted" Georgian planes. Later, he was to state that the bombardments were "in retaliation" for the earlier shooting-down of a Russian SU27 fighter plane. Meanwhile, Kitovani's dubious role in the Russian provocations had split the Georgian party in Sukhumi. On December 9th 1992, he transferred those troops he considered loyal into his personal armed force, and informed Kitovani, who was still minister of defence, that he would take or leave the latter's orders as he so desired. By the end of February, fighting broke out between the armies of both warlords. Russian forces attempted to intervene but were came under fire from the other two sides for their pains. Shortly afterwards, Kitovani was fired by Shevardnadze, and Karkarishvili to be granted his post. Political disruption had its own impact.

Sukhumi had become a place where no one could live any longer. "Everybody was fighting against everybody else," survivors recalled. "Families were split as they took different sides. We almost longed for the Russians to occupy the city. But anyone saying that thought aloud wasn't going to stay alive for long."

The final blow to the stricken city and its people was not long in coming.

On May 6th, the same day of Kitovani's dismissal and Karkarishvili's promotion, Russian aircraft bombarded Sukhumi once more, in retaliation, so it was said, for a "Georgian air raid" on Eshera four days earlier during which, it was claimed, a Georgian SU25 had been shot down. On May 10th, without the government's knowledge (or so the government insisted), a unit of less than a hundred Mkhedrioni attacked Russian barracks near Kutaisi. They were repelled with extreme force, leaving behind as they fled the scene six 'knights' killed and ten others carried off wounded.

Meanwhile, in Sukhumi pandemonium continued its reign. Hunger and shortages of everything affected every individual by now including the troops, for whom there was nothing left to loot any more. To make matters worse, Kobalia's troops, who had stood apart so far, now intervened and cut off the roads and railway from Sukhumi to the south east. It was not until July 27th, this time under the UN Security Council's supervision, that a ceasefire between all the sides involved was agreed on. Effectively, the withdrawal of armed units and dismantling of military installations on both sides of the frontline could be observed in the days that followed, while

convoys carrying food and medicine were directed into a Sukhumi wracked by starvation and epidemics.

The truce was barely two days old when a new offensive was launched from an unexpected quarter. On July 29th Kobalia suddenly occupied Senaki, followed by Abasha and Khobi. After this, the rebel troops turned east and pushed across the mountains into the southern parts of South Ossetia to take up position in the suburbs of Tskhinvali. On October 2nd, the Zviadists (still fired by the memory still fresh of their founder, barely deceased less than a year) seized their chance and, following Kobalia's initiative, simultaneously moved east and west. That day, Poti fell into their hands, depriving Shevardnadze of his sole access to the Black Sea. The following day Khoni and Vali fell, bringing Kobalia within shooting distance of Kutaisi. He chose not to attack the city, however, pushing instead further eastwards to take Kvemo-Kartli and Javakheti, south-west of Tbilisi. In a final flourish to his master-plan, he swooped back into Abkhazia and occupied Gali, the only slice of Abkhazia that had been spared the war and where Abkhazians and Mingrelians/Georgians had continued, if uneasily, to live side by side. Shevardnadze's republic had been sliced into two.

The situation was sobering: Tbilisi and a surrounding strip of about 20 miles formed the only territory where the president had any say left. The conquests of the Gamsakhurdists appear to have been accomplished without as much of a shot, and by the end of September, almost a week after the rebels' subsquent "forced withdrawal," Poti was as sleepy and quiet as it had ever been since the downfall of the Soviet Union, with not a ship in the port, not a car in the street.

Was there any danger?

"Absolutely not," insisted the acting head of police who received me at the port. "There's no fuel around and, in any case, what's there for any merchant vessel to come here for? The rebels turned up — hardly a shot was fired because the Mkhedrioni and other irregular groups had abandoned the town the day before. The rebels came to my office and told me that from now on they represented the lawful authorities. I told them to do as they pleased since I'm just a policeman and don't have anything to do with politics. Then they opened up the municipal safe and realised it was empty, so they then started looting the liquor stores. That was nothing new — Kitovani and Ioseliani's lot really hadn't done much else when *they* were here."

By evening, the liberators of the nation were to a man tanked up on booze and so it went on for three weeks after which they departed as casuallly as they had moved in.

Zugdidi, however, offered quite a different view. Here, most

government buildings had been turned into smoking ruins and shells. On the evening of my visit, the prime-minister Otar Patsatsia had come to his native town to see for himself what was left of its governing council and to appoint a new prefect, Colonel Adamia, a jolly old man in his 1960s who invited me to join him in a cup of coffee the next morning.

"Consider what has happened as a family quarrel," he said, dressed up in a grey-silver uniform glittering with all his old Soviet decorations. "I helped stop the Nazis in the mountains not far from here, sir — now that was war! It's not what you've seen here . . . We had a little chat with a few of the commanders of those lads, and then most of them came afterwards and handed in their weapons. We've given each of them a transfer and a letter of safe conduct and now they are free to go where they please. You can see it for yourself: Georgia won't go under that easily, I assure you."

A month later, Kobalia's men surrendered en masse and their hardliners had fled abroad. 'Loti' himself was apprehended in Kiev the following year and extradited to Georgia where he stood trial. In Abkhazia, events were to take a much more tragic turn. Early in the morning of September 16th, the Abkhazian and other Caucasian forces embarked on their final attack on the city. From that point on, it was every man woman and child for themselves and *sauve qui peut*.

This proved not to be easy at all, since all the roads were blocked and so was the port by gunboats. Only the airport was still functioning, so the only way out that remained was by air.

"The airport's hall was a mass of pushing, shoving, sometimes fighting people," remembers a young woman who tried to get a place on a plane — in vain. "And incredibly that turned out to be my good luck. I did have a ticket but three, four, maybe five times more tickets had been sold than there were places available. So I didn't get on. Later I found out that the plane I was supposed to have been on was been shot down."

The incident involving the shooting down of two civilian Tupolev 24 planes carrying refugees to Georgia proper has long been the subject of controversy. If the Georgian claims are true and the number of casualties amounted to less than a hundred, then the planes must have been more than half empty, a supposition which under the circumstances is highly unlikely.

An entirely different version was given by one of the main players on the other side of the Abkhazian scene: Ali Aliev. A Daghestani Lak from Makhachkala, a retired Soviet navy officer and secretary general of the Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Nations, Aliev dusted off his uniform once more in order to liberate the Caucasus "from Sukhumi to Derbent" and set off for Gudauta — alone in his car straight through four civil war zones. On arrival, he was asked to take command of the Confederation batallions.

"I said all right, but only if I could go with them myself into battle instead of sitting in some office. I drew up an elite unit of fighters with the courage of lions to take Sukhumi. That was my most glorious hour! In the dead of night, we loaded up a number of missiles brought over from Afghanistan — USA-made Stingers — onto boats and sailed out to a strategic spot. I personally fired the missiles [at the planes]. What you've heard so far of the incident is correct. What is *not* correct is the claim the planes were carrying passengers. We saw the craft come down and spotted boxes crammed with arms and ammunition in the wreckage that floated in our direction."

Ever since, Aliev has been known as the 'Pirate from Daghestan' on both sides of the Caucasus. "Sure, there's a price on my head in Georgia and the Russians would love to see me hang as well. Let them come and get me — but they'd never dare!"

Some say Aliev was just boasting. But the fact remains that no one else has claimed direct responsibility for the act. Whatever the case, given Shevardnadze's precarious position in Tbilisi, the fall of Sukhumi was only a matter of time — a time that swiftly approached. The hour everybody was waiting for came finally on September 27th, a week after the last ultimatum imposed on the Georgian armed forces had expired. The fearless head of state had himself flown into the Abkhazian capital a number of occasions, and there were times when he was lucky to get out with his life as he dodged the Grads.

"It really did look as if there was no escape," he recalled. "A number of times I honestly thought I wasn't going to get out of there alive. Everybody wanted an end to it all, but nobody dared make the move. Nobody dared go to the Russian commander, who was the only one in town in possession of a telephone that worked, and say: 'Please tell the enemy we surrender unconditionally.'"

It seemed as though the spirit of Gamsakhurdia ruled over Sukhumi from his grave.

The taking of the city, the countless acts of revenge taken on the remaining inhabitants by Abkhazians and their fellow fighters, the mass forcing out of refugees straight into the battlefield of Mingrelia where disorder and danger ruled, was the media scoop of the year and for a while drove even the drama of Yugoslavia from the front pages. But there was no way for the quarter of a million Georgians fleeing Abkhazia to pass through Mingrelia. Whole convoys of refugees were turned back by both warring sides — Kitovani and Ioseliani's men branded them as "cowardly traitors" and the fall of Sukhumi as "propaganda." Did they refuse to believe what

had happened or did they genuinely not know? It was impossible to tell either way. In the confusion that raged all around, the only remaining escape route for the exhausted and starving families was the road to Svanetiaa, over the more than 6,000 foot high Kodori Pass. Storms and exhaustion tormented this 'Journey of the Desperate' and at least two thousand refugees were not to survive.

On October 8th, a tired and disillusioned Shevardnadze walked into Yeltsin's office to sort things out — the Russian premier barely able to contain his joy at the turn of events. A week later, Shevardnadze returned to address a Georgian Parliament overwhelmed with impotent rage at the terms on offer: Georgia was to become a member of the CIS and Russian troops were to occupy all the main roads and railroads connecting Tbilisi with the coast.

On November 8th the Russian navy landed in Poti to join the small Russian army garrison already there. One of the commanders told me a day after his arrival: "We haven't heard a single shot. We've arrested a few dozens of men in arms but we haven't been able to establish which group they belong to. Apart from that, this place is a ghost town — it's certainly not a town in a state of war."

Within a month Kobalia's regiments had either surrendered of vanished into thin air. According to the subsequent treaty signed by Georgia and Russia on October 26th 1993, "all vital connections" would be placed under Russian military supervision — including the railways and highways between Tbilisi and Baku, between Tbilisi and Yerevan . . . and between Yerevan and Baku, without so much as asking the Azeris' permission. That would have come down to a blatant military occupation of the entire former Transcaucasian Soviet border with the exception of Talysh.

Back in Baku, prime-minister Surat Husseynov spoke out — something he rarely did — "in favour of complete implementation of the agreement." President Aliev too did something he rarely did. He hesitated. And then refused. Meanwhile, the Abkhazian government, now headed by rebel leader Vladislav Ardzinba, had taken refuge in Sukhumi, along with the Confederation of Mountain Nations. A ceasefire was agreed that included maintaining the status quo. And so Mother Russia kept guard. Peace was signed. And the war continued.

In the final week of November the Abkhazians and their Caucasian brethren attacked on all fronts. Gali and Kodori fell and by the end of the month not only all of eastern Abkhazia but also the western marches of Svanetia had fallen into separatist hands. Amidst all the misery, one tiny bright spot had shone for the government in Tbilisi: the offensive had broken the last shred of resistance by Kobalia's forces. The enemy had finished Shevardnadze's job for him.

In early February, in the press hall of the government house which also served as a temporary shelter for Parliament (since the real parliamentary buildings were still gutted ruins after Gamskhurdia's siege), Shevardnadze appeared with an icily grinning Yeltsin at his side in yet another display of solidarity.

"Of course I've gone a long way," Shevardnadze was to tell me later, "And the opposition are perfectly justified in accusing me of firing a shot in the dark — although they really should stop calling me a traitor and all that. In fact, I'm ready to take an even greater step forward and turn Georgia into a federation after the German example. But whatever the case, total secession of Abkhazia remains unacceptable for me, and if that's going to happen then I'll fight it by whatever means — including force if I have to."

That day, February 10th, at about the precise time we were talking, Abkhazia's self-declared Parliament had declared its republic "sovereign and fully independent" in sharp contrast to the "declaration of mutual understanding" they had agreed to with Georgia in Geneva six weeks earlier. There then followed an internal struggle within the Abkhazian leadership between those who favoured incorporation into the Russian Federation and those who argued for some form of compromise with Tbilisi. Initially, the Confederation's leadership supported the pro-Russian faction, but subsequently tended more and more towards the reconciliatory faction as tensions grew between the Kremlin and Dudayev. At the time of the invasion of Chechenia in late December, the Confederation immediately declared its support for the beleaguered Chechen leader and, shortly after, the same fighting force of Chechen, Circassian, Ingush and Abkhazian warriors who had forced the 'mini-empire' of Georgia to its knees marched on Chechenia in order to teach Big Brother a lesson.

Throughout 1994, it was all quiet on on the Abkhazian front as, despite regular shoot-outs and skirmishes, large-scale violence was not resorted to. In the first half of 1995, repeated efforts were made to repatriate the Mingrelians/Georgians who had fled Abkhazia — beginning with the District of Gali where, despite the heavy fighting, a few dozen villages had managed to be preserved by their Georgian inhabitants. The climate for repatriaton, however, proved hostile in the most literal sense — between January 17th-22nd, Abkhazian armed units had carried out a series of raids on the villages of Shesheleti, Totoboya and Tagiloni in the Gali region, the remaining pocket of Abkhazia where Georgians lingered on. The scenario had been the usual one: murder, rape, abduction, looting. The observers of the CIS and the UN looked on — and looked awkward — and observed that there was nothing they could do with regard to these events nor others yet to happen.

For two more years, Russian troops continued to be stationed in

Georgia in order to "keep peace." In the course of their duties, they killed dozens of Georgian citizens on the streets for no apparent reason, wounded hundreds more and harassed and robbed thousands. As for the refugees trying to return to their homes, they were stopped, stripped of their belongings and sent back (sometimes by abduction) by their self-same former colonial protectors who had been despatched to the area to aid them and facilitate their resettlement.

Time and time again, it seemed that the UN spokeswoman in Tblisi was programmed to produce the same reply to such allegations: "We know of no recent incidents, our observers are doing their jobs unhindered, everything is OK."

In July 1997, as one more half year mandate of the Russian troops was on the point of expiring, the Georgian parliament at last reached tyhe conclusion that everything was not OK and refused to authorised another half year extension.

"From now on," wrote editor-in-chief Zaza Gachechiladze in his newspaper *The Georgian Times*, "the Russian military in Georgia should be considered trespassers."

In fact, this was exactly what they had been from the first moment on. According to the CIS treaty, troops operating under the CIS banner may be deployed only with the consensus of all CIS member states. When the issue of sending CIS troops came to a vote in 1992, Azerbaijan voted against, making the ensuing "decision" and "mandates" legally void. Moreover, only Russian troops were deployed whereas, according to the rules, no single state may provide more than 49 per cent of the force comprising such a mission.

Not unlike the Upper Karabakh conflict, searching for true motives and reasons behind the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia means having to wade through an ocean of sloganeering, allegations, counter-allegations and trite 'expert' analysis. If there is one thing that brings these three conflicts together under one indicator, it must surely be the desire of Russian political forces to block the natural outlet along which Caspian oil would flow ultimately towards the Mediterranean — or at least make it such a risky venture that oil prices would stay at $15-plus per barrel.

Ironically, this is not entirely out of keeping with the interests of the Western oil multinationals, who have to keep stock values high — any dramatic decrease would send costs of their banking credits soaring. Which, in all, indicates that below the understandable outbursts of emotion there is a clear pattern underpinning the conflicts in the Southern Caucasus which various parties would rather passed unnoticed.

12

Clearing up the mess with Shevardnadze

"It was the year 1937. From Mamati and its surrounding villages anyone in authority or simply respected had started disappearing. Every day there were rumours that yet another 'people's enemy' had been apprehended. The chairman of the farmers' council, the director of the collective farm, the agricultural engineer, supervisers of the farming co-operatives, all were stigmatised as embezzlers, Trotskyites, nationalist heretics.

"Then one day, my father disappeared. He had been a member of the Party since 1924 and was in charge of the secondary school that opened in our village. The village looked up to him as a brilliant mind that commanded respect. My mother became withdrawn and refused to answer any of our burning questions. Outside the house, I felt a chilling alienation around me . . ."

The passage comes from the book *The Future Belongs to Freedom*. Its author is Eduard Shevardnadze. Elsewhere, he writes: "I believed in Stalin." The nation believed in Stalin. Unfortunately, Stalin did not believe in the nation. Then the nation believed in Khruschev. But Khruschev could hardly care less about the nation. Then when Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko turned up, nobody believed in them any more. Shevardnadze's "most faithful friend and confidant," Mikhail Sergeyovich Gorbachev, believed the nation believed in him. But his belief was unfounded.

Elsewhere in his mini-memoir, Shevardnadze writes that he was "shocked" by 1989's Bloody April in Tbilisi. This is most likely to be true since it would be hard to assume that Ligachov and his associates had briefed the Georgian fully over the measures to be taken with the capital's 'hooligans' and 'anti-Soviet activists'.

As Shevardnadze drily puts it: "The slogans of 'truth' and 'glasnost' were stifled then discarded by a mechanism incapable of adapting to them."

Mamati is the village in Guria, south-west Georgia, where Eduard Shevardnadze was born on January 25th 1928. Since March 1992 its most famous son had stood at the helm of the rudderless ship of Georgia, and which, as friend and foe alike were forced to admit, he prevented from sinking.

Spring 1995 in Tbilisi was sunny and happy. For a while, the crowds along Rustaveli Avenue could once more lose themselves in the heady spirit of bygone days. At the universities, the usual listlessness, so characteristic of Georgian young people of the time, had been taken over by a ripple of excitement: exams were drawing to a close.

On Chavchavadze Avenue, in broad daylight, the sound of shots were heard. Glass shattered, voices shouted. Less than a minute later, a Volga with no numberplates drove away from the scene at top speed, leaving a shop assistant lying bleeding in a fashion boutique, with broken glass and clothes strewn all over the floor. Later, the shop assistant was back on his feet — apart from some cuts he appeared to be all right, nothing serious. Two plainclothes policemen finally turned up. Nothing appeared to have been taken, it was reported. No, attacks like this are chilling 'warnings' or 'reminders'.

Anyone in Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan who is in retail business has to pay the mafia for 'protection' — against the same mafia. In Baku, shopkeepers told me that it all goes rather smoothly there, since they only have one mafia to deal with. In Tbilisi, however, there is more than one mafia — and each comes to claim its dues.

Despite such an alarming fact, it looked that in 1995 the fight against crime in Georgia had not been without some success: the rate of murders, burglaries and other violent crimes was down and most of the criminal organisations at local level, known as 'brotherhoods', were said to have been disbanded or else to have eliminated one another in gang wars. This had had been the fate of gangs like the Culinaria and the Wild Boys in Tbilisi. These hooligan gangs were formed during the Soviet 1980s by youths, usually from well-to-do families, who found their inspiration in the make-believe gangster world depicted in movies like *Once Upon a Time in America*. Each time they got arrested, they were back on the street again within days. All they wanted was a buzz or whatever mischief they could get up to as long as it helped get them away, even momentarily, from the suffocating grip of the horror that was petty-bourgeois, grey-suited Communism.

But the demise of the gangs in Georgia did not mean that terror had yet

disappeared from the streets of Tbilisi. Since the end of 1994, police desperately sought a group of 'Jack the Rippers' who committed ritual murders on passers-by after dark. One of their most horrific acts was in early July 1995 when a mother and her son were mercilessly butchered: the child had been hanged from a tree nearby while the mother was then raped and her throat slit.

It was on December 20th 1990 that Eduard Shevardnadze — the amiable Soviet foreign minister and, after Gorbachev, the most popular Soviet politician in the outside world — announced his surprise resignation, "in protest against dictatorship gaining ground" in the USSR. After his return to Tbilisi, that dictatorship no longer had a ground to stand on in any case. But in Georgia, that ground had been taken by the forces of organised crime, under the dubious 'salutary committee' of Ioseliani and Kitovani. Former cabinet leader Sigua, one of Gamsakhurdia's good old boys who had joined forces with the two firebrands, had got his old job back but his reputation had suffered irreparably in the meantime.

Still, it was Sigua who managed to convince both coup plotters that nobody in the outside world would take them seriously so long as they failed to find a driving personality who would save Georgia from the violent abyss of the Somalia syndrome of the 'stateless state' and put its flag back on the world map. And as they well knew, there was only one person who could do that: Shevardnadze.

Of course he got the job. But although the saviour of Georgia went on to lose the war over Abkhazia — never a good move for the ratings — it is curious, to go by the opinion polls carried out at regular intervals by both government and opposition, that he was given less blame for this than might be expected. In fact, all all times, even in the most difficult circumstances, the head of state kept a comfortable lead in terms of popularity in comparison to other politicians — even if sometimes Gia Chanturia came pretty close.

By the mid-1990s, however, at the same time election campaigns were going on, it looked as though Shevardnadze's star had begun to wane. In the cafes and at home, people were expressing mostly disrespectful disappointment in their head of state. The main cause was not so much the war but rather his perpetual tendency to compromise with Yeltsin and, paticularly, his political support for his Russian counterpart during the invasion of Chechenia. Another joint press conference on February 1994 by the two leaders in Tbilisi, simultaneously broadcast on television, featured an argumentative Shevardnadze and a unperturbed Yeltsin who smiled like a Cheshire cat.

It made a deep impression on the public whilst heavily annoying them at the same time. "Did you see that Russian?" came the indignant shouts at the journalists' cafe, a shabby establishment in the Old City where the customers aren't usually good examples of energetic movement. "Grinning from ear to ear — that sod's got his way everywhere! We're right back at square one."

Now whether Shevardnadze really had any choice in signing Georgia up to the CIS and allowing Russian troops onto Georgian territory, or else face the course of his country being set directly into the abyss, is a question most Georgians refuse to answer, even if deep in their hearts they know the reality of the situation. But this has never stopped them from cultivating hard feelings over what they perceive as the president's "capitulation" — Georgians tend to let their damaged pride prevail over common-sense in such matters.

"Shevardnadze?!" barked an army officer on leave, who with a few chums was busy consuming impressive piles of (cheap) Georgian champagne under the hot Tbilisi summer sun in 1995. "Believe you me, that's no president, that's a Russian marionette!"

But what would he have done in his place?

"Anything! Do a deal with the Abkhazians, the Ossetes. Split the entire country for all I care. But a single Russian soldier on our territory — over my dead body!"

But that's precisely what Gamsakhurdia tried to do and look what happened there.

"If you don't understand, you don't understand Georgia!" came the reply.

As an elderly university professor was later to observe: "Naturally I'm familiar with reactions like that. We've got more than our fair share of Don Quixotes over here."

According to subsequent opinion polls, in those days little more than 15 per cent of the public held a positive view of the head of state and his cabinet ministers. As for Parliament, only seven per cent approved of it and its actions. In both cases, half the remainder gave a negative response while the rest had had no opinion. Tellingly, no one suggested a possible alternative. The average Georgian (then a tiny minority in society between a mega-rich upper layer and the starving working masses dumped in the gutter) could merely shrug.

Hardly a favorable atmosphere, therefore, for the general and presidential elections which were to take place in October 1995 — provided, that is, Parliament managed to approve a new constitution which would turn Georgia into a federation along German lines in an attempt to join with the lost territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

For the time being, Shevardnadze would neither confirm nor deny his

candidacy for the presidency. Only in the late summer did he announce he would run — which ended in an easy victory for Shevardnadze himself as well as his party, which gained an absolute majority in the new parliament.

But for all the grumbling and groaning, it has to be acknowledged that anyone who took an objective look at Tbilisi during the summer of 1995 had to admit that the complaints were somewhat less than reasonable. People could — at least during the day — walk the streets in relative safely, they went to socialise once more, spending their money on ice creams, coffees and bottles of Coca-Cola (the global soft drink giant was quick to set up a factory in Georgia and does good business there despite the fact that Georgia's traditional fruit cocktails are admiteedly far tastier). In all, the low opinion the general public seems to have for Georgia's politics seems to be less damaging to political progress than the physical danger attached to being active in politics — a phenomenon of which Georgia has a long and colourful tradition, but which seems to have got slightly out of hand since independence, as the series of political murders committed from there on has reached quite impressive statistics.

For example, on April 20th 1994, interior secretary of state Gia Gulua came under a hail of machine-guns when still in his car outside his home. In the attack Gulua, his fiancee, driver and bodyguard were all killed. Later that year, on December 10th the same thing happened to Gia and Irina Chanturia when in their car — Gia perished while Irina escaped alive with serious injuries. In Moscow, on January 25th 1995, the former vice minister of defence and Butcher of Tskhinvali, Gia Karkarashvili, and his former secretary of state Gaatu Datuashvili were sprayed with gunfire as they stepped out of the military academy. Although his companion died of his wounds, Karkarashvili survived but, as mentioned previously, was to spend the rest of his life as an invalid.

Far more numerous were the attempts that failed to hit their targets, such as the bombs at the homes of the centre left political leader Jumbar Patiashvili on February 27th and the monarchist politician Timur Giorgioliani on November 3rd 1995. In both cases, it turned out that no one was at home. That same year on August 23rd, it was Shevardnadze himself who narrowly escaped death when a bomb exploded in the car waiting for him in the courtyard of the presidential office. A number of MPs present at the parking lot were severely injured, but the president, in a visible state of shock, got off with superficial cuts. Within the hour, armoured vehicles rumbled through the streets of Tbilisi and took up position by the ministries and national television station.

But nothing happened, and a few hours later Shevardnadze appeared, bruised and in his underwear, in front of the television cameras to assure the nation: "As long as I'm alive, let there be no doubt that from November

onwards Georgia will be ruled by a democratically elected parliament and not by the mafia . . ."

Mafia? It's only a word, really.

It soon began to look as if the man behind the attempt on Shevardnadze was no less than his own national security minister, Igor Giorgadze, who had flown overnight to Moscow immediately following the attack. Bids at extradition, just as in the case of Mutalibov, led to nothing, easy as it is for a reasonable sum to buy into the Russian system and thus, as a citizen of the Russian Federation, rest secure against extradition to any foreign power.

Meanwhile, the real mafia had more than enough cause to worry and betrayed more than enough grounds therefore on which their involvement in the attack could be deduced. Kitovani was slammed in jail on charges of murder, racketeering, looting and other crimes. As for his fellow conspirator Ioseliani, for the moment he was better off — he continued to sit comfortably in his seat in Parliament while his Mkhedrioni were rehabilitated under the guise of a cultural humanitarian organisation. They claimed they had surrendered their weapons "voluntarily."

"Well, at least that's what *they* claim," observed the UNHCR's representative Geldolph Everts, who in the meantime had been transferred from Yerevan to Tbilisi. "But as far as I know, confiscation of their arms by police turned out to be a complete fiasco. So they were given the okay to hand their arms over to the army, and the details of that are still subject to some controversy."

"It's my personal belief that not even ten per cent of the Mkhedrioni's weapons have been handed in," Shevardnadze's adviser Peter Mamradze was to acknowledge little later. "But their paramilitary display has vanished off the streets — and in this country that's already quite an accomplishment in itself."

It was all change in many ways. The Mkhedrioni instantly had an already notorious successor in the shape of the Agheti Wolves, a movement from the area of the same name which had moulded itself along the lines of the militias of the American extreme right. On January 25th 1995, they came out into the open for the first time with a bomb attack on the main headquarters of the Russian troops near Tbilisi, followed on April 9th by an attack on the residence of the Russian ambassador and the Russian military delegation's office in the capital.

So far, no victims had been claimed by the attacks of the Agheti Wolves. That changed on June 8th as a unit opened fire on a joint Russian-Georgian checkpoint in the north of the country, killing a Georgian officer, David Arabidze. As for the terrorists, they escaped by almost miraculous means. This most recent attack created some confusion within the opposition.

"Confusion?" commented the leader of the centre-right Georgian Unity Party, Nodar Natadze. "In my opinion, I have not the slightest doubt as to

who is really behind the Agheti Wolves. The mere fact that after any assassination or assassination attempt no name of any suspect is ever made public, let alone arrests made, is proof enough for me that a very substantial part of the political violence in this country is the handiwork of the 'Gravnye Rasverdoplavyenye Armiy' — the Kremlin's own secret army which has an unlimited agenda and unlimited cash and arms. Why do the perpetrators carry out these acts time and again unhindered? Why, out of a whole group of Russian soldiers, is it precisely a Georgian officer who is shot dead? I keep demanding answers to all those questions and I never get them!"

Despite the gathering controversy, the Georgian government did try to constrain political crime along with 'ordinary' crime — even if the word 'political' in this context was interpreted rather one-sidedly. Kitovani had been incarcerated in early 1995, after together with a few hundred armed followers he had tried to cross the border from Abkhazia in attempt to launch a 'reconquista'. The attempt failed and ended in a blood-bath, thereby serving its real purpose: to frustrate the laborious negotiations and therefore undermine Shevardnadze's position.

The most provocative event in spring 1995, however, was the Dokvadze/Gelbakhiani 'trial', which was concluded with death sentences passed against two terrorists, Irakli Dokvadze and Peter Gelbakhiani. They were the perpetrators of a bomb attack in June 1992 made against Ioseliani. Their target had escaped unhurt, but five bystanders lost their lives and twenty more lay injured. Both bombers had been arrested six months later by Interpol in Baku and immediately extradited. Likewise, in the autumn of 1994, Loti Kobalia was arrested in the Ukraine and dispatched back to Georgia with little fuss. He was charged, among other things, with conspiracy, multiple murder and armed insurrection against the state. Beyond doubt a capital verdict was in store for him as well. However, the offical line is that no executions have taken place in Georgia since Shevardnadze's ascendancy since he generously signed every request for clemency (pressure groups claim otherwise). In 1997, Parliament had prepared the necessary legislation to abolish capital punishment altogether.

Whether some officials were a bit too zealous in marginalising any emergence of 'neo-Zviadism' or intended to abuse their positions to settle personal scores, a number of arrests of partisans, real or assumed, loyal to the fallen head of state did cause many an eyebrow to be raised. Among those apprehended were Tamaz Kikachkheishvili, who had been at the head of the nationalist 'Round Table' when it was under Gamsakhurdia's control, but had taken his distance from him long before the president's downfall, Clara Shorman, the local representative of Helsinki Watch, Eteri Mgabalishvili, leader of the St Ilia Society, and the poet activist Nodar Zalaghonia. At the same time, the offices of the Round Table's most

prominent publications, *Iberia Spektri* and *Sakartvelos Samreko*, were raided at regular intervals. The so-called Pan-Georgian Association for Human Rights, a pressure group with close ties with the Round Table, spoke in those days of a hundred or so political prisoners, packed up with other detainees in overcrowded jails where sixty people living in a room meant for eight was reported to be far from exceptional.

Between January 1994 and May 1995, the number of unnatural deaths in prisons and detention centres was up to 150. Outside the prison walls, hundreds of complaints were filed against the forces maintaining law and order during the summer of 1995, the worst cases among them being the murder by police of a suspected car thief in Kuirta on the road to Chkhinvali and the near murder of the correspondent of Russian TV channel Ostankino, who was taken to hospital with serious injuries but survived "through sheer luck" in the words of the surgeons on duty. No charges have followed up the allegations, leaving the motives behind the spate of deaths unclear.

To the surprise of many, the government did react and address itself to the causes behind the worsening image of its forces. During the autumn, hundreds of policemen of all ranks were fired and dozens thrown in jail. As for political developments, there was even more hope glimmering on the horizon.

The new consititution, signed by Shevardnadze the day after the car bomb had almost exploded in his face, made a federation of Georgia, and included a high level of home rule for Ajaria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia: all decisions made by their local parliaments would be respected by the national assembly except those concerning defence and foreign affairs. Only the head of state could use his right of veto, which in its turn, however, would be subject to appeal at the high court.

Only Ajaria went along with the new system without too many objections. The Abkhazian separatists rejected the new consitution outright even before the ink had dried. The South Ossetian regime at first also refused any form of reintegration and infromed the president that "reunification" with North Ossetia in the Russian Federation was their only aim. However, it soon became clear that the North Ossetians, who meanwhile had joined the Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Nations despite their continuing battle with the Ingush, would not hear of this and by the end of 1995 had even expressed their intention of opening an 'embassy' in the Georgian capital. In spring 1997, a compromise with South Ossetia seemed imminent.

In Abkhazia, things were to get even more complicated. Initially, the Abkhazians had continued to enjoy Moscow's support but all this had changed dramatically as in spring 1995 the Abkhazian leader Vladislav

Ardzinba announced a general mobilisation throughout the area, this time against the Russians, supporting resistance in Chechenia against the Russian invaders. Meanwhile, he turned to Tbilisi in a reconciliatory move and even managed to agree to the return of at least a section of the quarter of a million refugees waiting to go back home to Abkhazia. This proved more than Moscow was willing to tolerate. The border with Abkhazia was sealed off and 'punitive expeditions' were carried out against both newly-returned Georgians and Abkhazians loyal to Ardzinba. Houses were ransacked and burnt and whole families massacred before the very eyes of the Russian 'peacekeepers'. The main culprits were Abkhazia's 'interior minister' Agrba and another local leader, by name Shamba, who openly advocated Abkhazia's incorporation into the Russian Federation.

From that point on, the situation steadily worsened in Abkhazia. Most people had to live without electricity, and food distribution had become all but completely disrupted. Apart from a few exceptions, such as the protection by Russian troops of the villagers of Kvemo Bargebi against the ganags of murderous looters, the Russians generally behaved as occupiers rather than peacekeepers and, in most cases, did nothing to stop the rapidly expanding wave of murder and destruction.

There's an old Caucasian saying that goes: "Let's look back in honesty and speak our minds frankly." The basic cause of the rapid accumulation of crises in Georgia is international diplomacy. Just as in Azerbaijan, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in particular has self-indulgently revelled in one act of idiocy after another. After the example of the European Union, the OSCE has proved itself to be little more a safety net for politicians in trouble. For the countless victims of armed conflicts, its interventions usually mean a confinement, no more, of their misery. One simply sees to it that the guns fall silent, the bloodstained images disappear from the front pages and that one keeps one's lavishly paid job. This is no criticism but simply a statement of the facts.

The Georgian displaced peoples from the seceded areas were far from being the only victims languishing in the general state of misery throughout the country. During the winter of 1994-95 the pyramid scam had hit Georgia, and thousands of families were ruined by cynical businessmen who lured them into investment schemes that promised as much as 15-25 per cent return on their cash per month. Even foreigners, among them quite respectable UNHCR employees, had fallen into the trap. For most of the local victims, however, the losses meant the end of their last means of survival — most had sold whatever antiques or other valuable objects they could lay their hands on in order to create a cash reserve.

About half of these Georgian financial vampires were put behind bars by the summer of 1995. But most of the stolen cash — estimated at well over $30 million — remained hidden abroad, as did the other half of the fraudsters. The hide-out of one, Koba Devidze, whose firm Ocrus Tassi had stolen about $3 million from its small investors, was even publicly known: together with a German accomplice he had bought a chain of restaurants in Karlsruhe, Germany, in the process laundering his stolen money unhindered by the local authorities. Among the other slippery-fingered individuals on the run were Devidze's partners Gia Galoglishvili and Ramaz Chitia, SASCO's director Kadagishvili, Monarch director Lagradze and A&Co director Batiashvili, along with amounts of anything between $1-3 million. Apart from Germany, Austria, Italy and Benelux were postulated as their possible hide-outs.

Gamsakhurdia's former political power-base by 1996 had all but died out after the last trials had ended with mainly light sentences. Crack-downs and arrests had become rare. Although demand was now minimal and sales figures low, publications of the Zviadists were back on the streets again for sale as were their failed mentor's books. After a few stiff drinks too many, an individual could sometimes be provoked into raising his fist against another tippler who had insulted the ex-president — but most times it would end with a meek apology. "The man was no good, but he was chosen by the people and the Russians did him in" — or so goes popular wisdom. Of course, Gamsakhurdia's "Four Thousand Years of Humiliation" are not over yet, but expecting a Georgian to take the barricade on an empty stomach is really asking too much.

The question remains where all this will leave Georgia in decades to come. Not unlike Azerbaijan, the remaining parts of the county are far from prosperous but at least no one is starving and the economy is doing substantially better than even the most pessimistic balance-sheet predictions. As for the breakaway Abkhazian and Ossetian communities, solutions seemed far more within reach at the time of writing than in Azerbaijan. The ultimate publicity gimmick which embarrassed both Russian and Western observers was the surprise visit of Ardzinba to Tblisi in the summer of 1997 during which, in front of a wall of television cameras, he and Shevardnadze fell into each others' arms. The conclusion has to be that if the nations of the Caucasus want to organise peace, they can only achieve success if they do it by defying all others and blocking all foreign interference. It is this interference lies at the very bottom of the outbreak of conflicts, muzzling the media with evasive statements and straightforward obstruction while encouraging shadowy powers behind the scenes to take control of the stage. Which they did, swiftly, and in a most profitable way, as the concluding chapter of this book will illustrate.

References

Afanasyan, Serge, *L'Arménie, l'Azerbaidjan et la Géorgie de l'indépendence à l'instauration du pouvoir soviétique 1917-1923*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1982.

Aliyev, Elgar, *Nagorno-Karabakh — istoriye, fakty, rabitiya*, Elm, Baku, 1989.

Allen, W. E. D. & P. Muratov, *Caucasian battlefields*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1953.

Alstadt, Audrey L., *The Azerbaijani Turks — power and identity under Russian rule*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1992.

Ashorbely, Sara, *Gazudarstvo Shirvanshahov*, Elm, Baku, 1983.

Atkin, M., *Russia and Iran 1780-1828*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1980.

Baddeley, F. C., *The Russian conquest of the Caucasus*, Longman, 1903 [Curzon, 1999].

Bakikhanov, Abbas-Kuly Aga, *Gulstan Iram*, ed. Z. M. Bunyatov, Zam, Baku, 1993.

Bihl, W., *Die Kaukazuspolitik der Mittelmaechte*, Kommission für Geschichte Oesterreichs, Vienna, 1975.

Daskuranzhy, Movses, *The history of the Caucasian Albanians*, London Oriental Series, London, 1961.

Donabédian, patrick & Claude Moutafian, *Le Karabakh*, GDM, Paris, 1989.

Dumas, Alexandre, *Le Caucase*, François Bourin, Paris, 1990.

Eberhard, Elke, *Osmanische Politik gegen die Safaviden im 16. Jahrhundert*, Freiburg, 1970.

Environmental condition and nature producing activity in the Republic of Azerbaijan, State Committee of the Azerbaijan Republic on Nature Protection, Baku, 1993.

Gerretson, C., *De geschiedenis der 'Koninklijke'*, I:VI, Bosch & Keuning, baarn, 1972.

Gougouchvili, S. & N., D. & O. Zourabichvili, *La Géorgie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1972.

Gunter, Michael M., *Transnational Armenian Activism*, RISCT Conflict Studies No. 229, London, 1990.

Homayounpour, P., *L'affaire Azerbaidjan, Payot, Lausanne*, 1967.

Kazemzadeh, Firuz, *The struggle for Transcaucaucasia*, Oxford, 1951.
Keun, Odette, *Au pays du toissin d'or*, Flammarion, Paris, 1923.

Lordkipanidze, Mariam, *Georgia in the 11th-12th centuries*, Ganatleba, Tbilisi, 1987.

Mahmudov, Yagub, *Vzaymoyotnoshenya gazudarstvo Akkoyonlu y Sefevidov s Zapadnoyevopeyisksmy Stranamy*, Yzdatelsto Bakinskovo Universitiyeta, Baku, 1991.
Malville, Georges de, *La tragédie arménienne de 1915*, Lanore, Paris, n.d.
Minorsky, V., *Studies in Caucasian history*, Taylor's Foreign Press, London, 1953.

Pasdermadjian, H., *Histoire de l'Arménie*, Libraire Orientale, Paris, 1986.
Podlesskikh, Gyorgy & Andrei Tyereshonok, *Vory v zakony*, Vyeche, Moscow, 1995.

Sumbatoglu Sumbatzadeh, Alisoybat, *Azerbeidzhansty etnogenez y formirovanye naroda*, Elm, Baku, 1993.
Suny, R. G., *Transcaucasia — nationalism and social change*, Ann Arbour, Michigan, 1983.
Suny, R. G., *The making of the Georgian nation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988.
Swietochowski, Tadeusz, *Russian Azerbaijan 1905-1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

Ter Nimassian, Anahide, *La république arménienne 1918-1920*, Complexe, Brussels, 1989.
Trevor, K. B., *Essay on the history and culture of Caucasian Albania*, London, 1959.

van der Leeuw, Charles, *Storm over de Kaukasus*, Babylon, Amsterdam, 1997.
Velichky, Vasily Lvovich, *Kavkaz*, St Petersburg, 1904 [Elm, Baku 1990].

Wolf, R. W., *The saga of the Nobel family and the Russian oil industry*, Stanford University Press, London, 1976.
Woods, J. E., *The Aqqoyunlu — clan, confederation, empire*, Chicago, 1976.

Yunussova, Leila, *Torgovaya expansiya Anglyi v basseinyi Kaspiya v pervoy plovnye XVIII veka*, Elm, Baku, 1988.