

# The North West Caucasus and Great Britain

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(An ignoble tradition continued)

or

The Unknown Diaspora

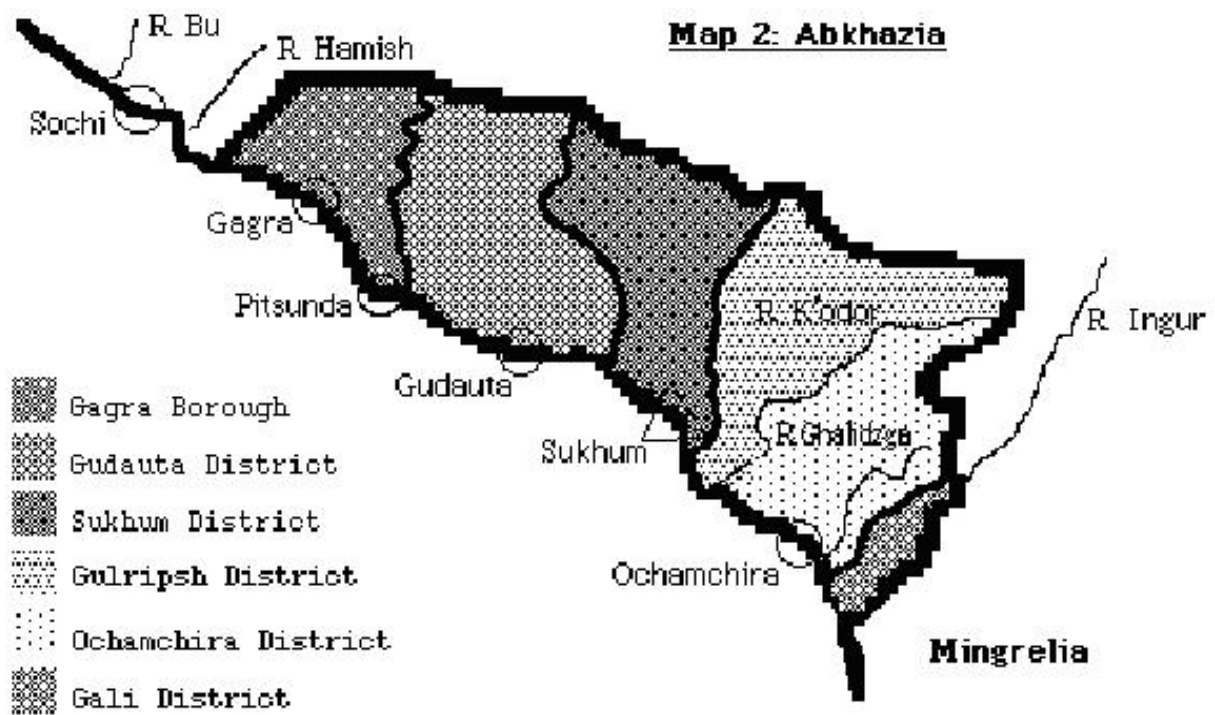
(Autumn 1992)

The North West Caucasians consist of three peoples Circassians, Ubykhs and Abkhazian-Abazinians. The tribes of Shapsugh, Bzhedugh, Temirgoys, Abzakhs, Besleneys and Kabardians make up the Circassians. They are named N.W. Caucasians from the geographical region in which they historically lived and where they formed, as far as one can tell, the autochthonous inhabitants. That historical homeland is depicted on the following maps

Map 1

**DISTRIBUTION OF NORTH WEST CAUCASIAN TRIBES  
(CIRCASSIANS, UBYKHS, ABKHAZ-ABAZAS) ACCORDING  
TO MAIN DIALECTAL DIVISIONS PRIOR TO THE MASS - EMIGRATION OF 1864**





In later times the Caucasus was fated to bear the yoke of many other imperial powers. We shall here be particularly concerned with the interplay of Russian, Turkish and Georgian interests in the area.

Ottoman Turkey began to take a keen interest in the coastal districts at least of the N.W. Caucasus from the 16th century, when the seeds of islam started to be sewn amongst peoples who for centuries hitherto had adhered to christianity church-services in Abkhazia were for centuries conducted in Greek, which eventually gave way to Georgian. Russia began to rival Turkey for dominance in the region during the 18th century. A description of this competition and the tragic consequences it was to have for the N.W. Caucasians may be found in R. Traho's **Circassians**, printed in an abridged form in *The Central Asian Survey* (10, 12, 1991, 1-63pp), from which much of the following is taken. At first the Circassians tended to side with Russia, as she promised to recognise the independence of Kabardia in accordance with the Belgrade Treaty of 1739. But after Russia's real intentions were revealed (Russia actually claimed Kabardia in an agreement with the Crimean Khan in 1774), all-out war with Russia was inevitable, and closer ties with Turkey, including the large-scale adoption of islam, followed. Traho dates the start of the great Russo-Caucasian war, which ended only in 1864, to 1763.

The cause of the Caucasian mountaineers excited much interest and admiration abroad, notably amongst British observers and visitors to Circassia in the 1830s. Prominent amongst these were the diplomat David Urquhart and the authors of four important books Capt. Edmund Spencer [Travels in Circassia, Krim Tatory, etc.](#) (2 vols., 1836) and **Travels in the Western Caucasus** (2 vols., 1838), J.A. Longworth **A Year among the Circassians** (2 vols., 1840), and James S. Bell **Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838 and 1839** (2 vols., 1840). From their writings certain points are revealed with great clarity their high level of social organisation the harmony with their mountain-environment in which they lived and as a result of which the mountain-slopes were turned into fertile farms the unanimity of purpose which united the Circassians, the Ubykhs and the northern Abkhazian

tribes in defending their land against Russian aggression and the dignity of the people in pursuing this just cause. Spencer quotes the text of the North Caucasians Declaration of Independence, addressed to The Monarchs of Europe and Asia, from which one gains an idea of the cavalier treatment of their territory in such international agreements as the Treaty of Adrianople of 1829. Treaties concerning which we know nothing and which have been signed between Russia and Turkey present warriors to the Russians who have made Russia tremble and mountains where a Russian foot has never trod. Russia tells the West that Circassians are her prisoners and wild bandits or simply wild people whom kindness cannot tame, nor the rule of law restrain. We protest in the name of God against such a lie... For forty years we have been openly fighting against the accusation with our weapons and are defending our liberty. Regarding their trust in such British visitors the Russians told the Circassians that All Englishmen who come to Russia are liars one should not believe them even if they swear an oath to the truth of what they say.

Despite widespread sympathy, which apparently reached as high as King William IV, Palmerston, chose to make no strong stand on behalf of the Caucasians -- Traho points to the important trade Manchester businessmen were conducting at the time with Russia. In a vote of censure in Parliament as late as 18th March 1848 Anstey charged Palmerston with treason towards both England and Circassia in that he deceived Parliament over relevant events -- Palmerston survived by only 16 votes!

The Russians with their superior numbers were bound to win in the end, but only after a desperate war of attrition, in which village (aul) after village along with farms was destroyed, were the N.W. Caucasians compelled to surrender. They were faced with the choice of being resettled in the Kuban plains or of migrating to the Ottoman Empire. The vast majority, including the entire Ubykh nation, chose the latter course. There are eye-witness accounts of the misery that characterised the hurried evacuation of the Caucasus in over-crowded boats, many of which sank, to bring the destitute travellers to an unprepared and unfamiliar land. Take Consul Stevens letter to Earl Russell (Trebizond 17 Feb 1864) During the last 3 days fresh arrivals have taken place, and circa 3,000 have been landed< some 40,000 more were preparing to quit their country. Amongst those who have reached, hundreds are labouring under disease, superinduced by famine and misery which they suffered prior to embarkation.... Meanwhile disease is spreading fearfully amongst the Circassians and natives the mortality from typhus is on the increase the panic is great and general, and everyone is making arrangements to quit the town. The desolation left behind is clear from Consul Dickson's missive to Earl Russell (Sukhum 22 Feb 1864) The probable immediate result of the present cruel war cannot be better illustrated than by a local saying, that |even a woman might now-a-days travel from Soudjouk-Kale; to Anapa without fear of meeting a single human being. The deserted Circassian and Ubykh lands were peopled by Cossacks and Russians. Writing in 1884 Yakov Abramov stated A region of the utmost richness became desolate. The Cossacks turned out to be absolutely unfitted for cultivating it. Huge stretches of land, formerly occupied by the Mountaineers do not even arouse in anyone the desire to acquire them, since they seem absolutely unsuitable for cultivation. And yet, these very stretches of land were formerly occupied by a numerous population and were splendidly cultivated.

Many Abkhazians shared the same fate as their cousins in 1864, and many more were to be expelled from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire in 1877-78. It seems to be about this time that the Georgians decided to lay claim to their land. The Georgians are wholly unrelated to the Abkhazians, though together with the Mingrelians, the Svans and the Laz they make up the Kartvelian people. All four Kartvelian languages are mutually unintelligible, though since 1930 all of the Kartvelians living within (Soviet) Georgia have automatically been styled Georgians and have learnt Georgian at school, since their own languages do not have literary

status. What better way to lay claim to a piece of land than to asseverate that the indigenous population forms part of your own ethnic group= Consider, then, the following> in a recent book on the 19th century activist Dimitri Q'ipiani Uturashvili (1989.254) writes> «In connection with the ethnogenesis of the Kartvel people D. Q'ipiani wrote (1853) |Although today it is the Kartvels residing in the Governate of Tbilisi who are called *kartvelebi*, nevertheless to this tribe we shall assign not only the Imeretians and Gurians, who spoke one and the same language and were of the same religion before the time of Parnavaz <sup>a</sup>3rd century B.C.<sup>o</sup>, but to this tribe also belong the Mingrelians, **Abkhazians**, Svans as well as the Kobuletiens, Ajaris, Laz and the Ch'ar-Belaknian Ingiloans, who are today all muslim.

D. Q'ipiani's assignment of the Abkhazians to the Kartvel ethnos can, it appears, be explained by the long and intimate Kartvelo-Abkhazian cultural-historical relationship, by their multi-faceted common historical fate, which united both people, and by the fact that Abkhazia always represented a part of a united Georgia <sup>a</sup>sic!<sup>o</sup>. The Georgian thinker judged the Abkhazians ethno-culturally to be so close a tribe that he placed them among the Kartvel tribe.<

Though the view that maintained an ethno-linguistic identity between the N.W. Caucasian Abkhazians and the Kartvelian Georgians could not be sustained, it has been replaced by a variety of arguments, all of which attempt to belittle the Abkhazians in a number of ways. First consider some population figures>

#### Demographic changes in Abkhazia (1886-1970)

	1886	1897	1926	1939	1959	1970
Abkhazians	58,961	58,697	55,918	56,147	61,197	77,276
Kartvelians	3,989	25,875	67,494	91,067	158,221	199,595
Russians	972	5,135	20,456	60,201	86,715	92,889

#### Population of Abkhazia (1979 & 1989)

Whole Population	486,082	525,061	100%	100%
Abkhazians	83,097	93,267	17.1%	17.8%
Kartvelians	213,322	239,872	43.9%	45.7%
Armenians	73,350	76,541	15.1%	14.6%
Russians	79,730	74,913	16.4%	14.2%

The shift in the balance since 1886 between (especially) the Abkhazians and the Kartvelians (mainly Mingrelians) in the population of Abkhazia is in large measure explained by the forced immigration policy of non-Abkhazians into Abkhazia activated by (the Mingrelian) Lavrent'i Beria while he was still in charge of Transcaucasia in 1937. From the mid-1940s all Abkhaz-language schools were closed to be replaced by Georgian-language schools, and publishing in Abkhaz was banned. Though the Abkhazians did not suffer the same total expulsion to Central Asia that Stalin inflicted on other North Caucasians (such as the Chechens and the Ingush) during the war, a |scholarly basis\ for their possible expulsion was devised by the Georgian philologist P'avle Ingoroq'va in the late 1940s, when, on the basis of

specious Kartvelian etymologies of Abkhazian toponyms he argued that the North West Caucasian Abkhazians came to Abkhazia only in the 17th century, where they displaced and took over the name of a Kartvelian tribe of Abkhazians, who (he argued) had actually given their name to the region! After the deaths of Stalin and Beria, Ingoroq\va was rightly censured and sent to an academic Coventry for publishing these fantasies under the guise of scholarship, but since 1989 the atmosphere has changed in central Georgia. Critic Rost\om Chkheidze sings the praises of Ingoroq\va for his contribution to the history of |Western Georgia\, calling for his posthumous academic rehabilitation< indeed, a street in Tbilisi has already been named after him! Professor of history, Mariam Lortkipanidze, recognises Ingoroq\va as the progenitor of |one of the scholarly theories\ relating to the history of |Western Georgia\, even though she herself claims dual aboriginal status in Abkhazia for both N.W. Caucasian Abkhazians and |Georgians\ (by which she means the ancestors of the Laz-Mingrelians). Academician Tamaz Gamq\relidze (honorary member of both the British and American Academies) presents an absurd philological argument in support of Ingoroq\va\s theory that Abkhazia owes its name to an original but mysteriously |lost\ Kartvelian tribe of this name (though he carefully avoids suggesting any date for the appearance in Transcaucasia of the N.W. Caucasian Abkhazians), and the Svan linguist Aleksandre Oniani again argues that the Abkhazians are relative newcomers, though his date for their arrival is some 400-500 hundred years ago. All Kartvelian commentators view the Abkhazian Kingdom, which lasted for 200 years from the 8th to the 10th century as a |Western Georgian phenomenon\.

Abkhazians (and Ossetes) since 1989 have been ritualistically denigrated by both politicians and a veritable panoply of leading Georgian writers as |bandits\ (Nodar Natadze of the National Front, Shevardnadze), |wild, uneducated people\ (Zviad Gamsakhurdia), having |an intelligentsia on a low level\ (Gia Ch\ant\uria of the National Democratic Party)< of the leading Abkhazian writer Fazil Iskander T\ariel Ch\ant\uria said that he advocated cannibalism! Shalva Inal-Ipa is regularly depicted as a charlatan masquerading as an academic. A passage from Inal-Ipa\s 1976 book is cited by Guram Pandzhik\idze, now Chairman of the Georgian Writers\ Union> |I recorded in June 1952 in the village of Es“era these words of a 70 year-old...The whole Caucasian coast of the Black Sea used to be called Kalxa. The population of Kalxa spoke Abkhaz. Its frontiers stretched far from south to north, and it was ruled by Abkhazian kings, who had a strong army and 350 forts\ (p.202 of **Questions of the Ethno-Cultural History of the Abkhazians**, as presented in Pandzhik\idze\s and Miminoshvili\s **Truth about Abkhazia**, both works in Russian). This is adduced as the sort of evidence Abkhazians are said to rely on to prove their historical rights over the land. It is a pity that the eyes of Pandzhik\idze and his co-author did not pass over to the top of the following page, where they would have read this< |In a word, if in new and old statements of this kind we find a definite exaggeration of the role of the Abkhazian element, **it is equally mistaken**, it seems to me, completely to ignore it in the ethno-cultural history of the enigma that is Colchis\ (stress added). Anyone who speaks out against a position adopted by Tbilisi is met not by reasoned argument but by a torrent of abuse across the whole Georgian media, but of course those Western delegations who visit the country for at most a week of familiarisation understand nothing of this and are exposed only to smiling Kartvelians plying them with food, wine and gifts. Thus is the true situation concealed and ignorance of it entrenched. Eventually the world will come to treat Georgian official spokesmen with the same degree of scepticism that is surely universally applied today to those of (say) Iraq, but by then it may be too late for Abkhazia.

It is part of the aim of the Georgian propaganda-machine to depict the Abkhazians as fanatical muslims, whereas it is actually true to say of the 102,000 Abkhazians resident in the former USSR that religion today is of NO importance whatsoever for them -- and long may it remain so! Of the South Ossetians Shevardnadze\s present Foreign Minister said on Dutch TV while he was still (Shevardnadze\s place-man) serving as Soviet Ambassador to The Hague

that they were |muslims who speak a Turkic language\, whereas they are, if anything, christians who speak an Iranian language! Compare these and numerous parallel misrepresentations of the Abkhazians by the Georgians to what imperial Russian propaganda said in the last century about the Circassian |savages\.

Had Palmerston been inclined to intervene on the side of the N.W. Caucasians, the history of the area would certainly have been radically different. Not only might the indigenous population of the North West Caucasus have been spared decades of misery and death at home, there might never have occurred the mass-migrations that led to the huge but largely unknown N.W. Caucasian diaspora, as a result of which remnants of these peoples are today to be found all over the Near and Middle East, as well as in Western Europe and America. One consequence of this diaspora is that the Ubykh language is today spoken by one last speaker, the octogenarian Tefvik Esenç. Both the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia might have been spared not merely decades under Russian imperial rule but also 70 years of Soviet communism. The severe dangers threatening the N.W. Caucasians today in their Caucasian homeland might have been totally avoided.

But the days of Palmerston were not the last time when Great Britain had a chance to influence Caucasian affairs. In 1917 an independent North Caucasian Mountain Republic was declared, which quickly became a target for both the White Russian and the Red Armies. Traho writes of 1919> €General Denikin threw himself on the North Caucasian Front |with one third of all his available forces\, and England, in the person of General Briggs, all but demanded self-liquidation from the government of the North Caucasus.< By 1921 the whole Caucasus was in Bolshevik hands. The Circassian homeland was split into a number of administrative units within the Russian Federation, whilst Abkhazia was awarded the status of a Union Republic, albeit with special treaty-ties to Georgia, from 1921 to 1931. From 1931 its status was reduced to that of an €autonomous republic< within Georgia by dictat of (the Georgian) Stalin.

In the days of *perestrojka* both Circassians and Abkhazians saw an opportunity to redress something of the injustices of history. The Circassians sought greater autonomy from Moscow, and a group of Circassians living abroad began to agitate for the right of the diaspora-communities to return home. As Circassians and Abkhazians living in Turkey often refer to themselves collectively as |Cherkess\, this movement is now called |The World Cherkess Movement\ and aims to facilitate the return to their ancestral lands of N.W. Caucasians in general. Some progress has been made, and the Soviet authorities set aside a not inconsiderable sum to help in the resettlement-process. The Abkhazians set out their grievances against control from Tbilisi in their **Abkhazian Letter** of 1988. This was bitterly criticised in the Georgian media throughout 1989, and consequent Kartvelian provocations (notably by Gamsakhurdia and his collaborator, the late Merab Kostava) led to bloodshed in Abkhazia in July of that year. Because of the evident danger to Abkhazia from an all-pervasive and ugly chauvinism on the part of the Kartvelians (especially the Georgians), various North Caucasian Mountain-peoples (including Abkhazians and Circassians) joined together in August 1989 under the banner of a North Caucasian Assembly, under the presidency of (Kabardian) Yuri Shanibov. The new Union Treaty towards which Gorbachev was working and which occasioned the coup that led to his downfall in 1991 would have given the autonomous republics equal status to that enjoyed by the 15 Union Republics. This would have been a positive step forward for both Circassians and Abkhazians. But it was not to be realised. The Soviet empire was gone (or going) but the Russian and Georgian empires remained...

The wild nationalist (Mingrelian) Gamsakhurdia was already in power in Georgia when the USSR collapsed. He was already prosecuting a bloody war against the South Ossetians, and all Georgia-watchers expected the troops eventually to be transferred to Abkhazia, as has now happened under the leadership of Shevardnadze. The Abkhazians continued to work with their North Caucasian cousins in what from November 1991 had become the so-called Confederation of North Caucasian Peoples (16 peoples including both North and South Ossetians are members). Within Abkhazia tension remained high, because of the obstructionist tactics followed by Kartvelian members of the local parliament to any positive political moves attempted by the Abkhazians in harmony with all the other peoples of their republic, who together, of course, form a 55% majority-population. With Gamsakhurdia in power and the world sensibly refusing to give him the comfort of international recognition, the Abkhazians hoped really to achieve a break with Tbilisi. But all this changed in the wake of the Kartvelian coup that took place over the new year of 1991-92. However uncongenial, Gamsakhurdia was actually elected to power by an overwhelming majority of the popular vote. Nobody gave those who overthrew him, National Guard chief Tengiz Kitovani and the ex-convict head of the rival and notorious militia known as the *Mkhedrioni* (Knights), Dzhaba Ioseliani, both in league with a group of politicians including Gamsakhurdia's sacked premier, (the Mingrelian) Tengiz Sigua, permission to do so. None of these individuals could command world-respect, for, after all, were they not all tainted with association with the ousted Gamsakhurdia? And so they turned to the one well-known Georgian who was still held in esteem by most of the significant leaders in the West, former Communist Party Boss of Georgia (1972-85) Edward Shevardnadze, and this despite his having left his friend Gorbachev in the lurch by his unexpected resignation as Soviet Foreign Minister in 1990. It is natural that he accepted the call to return home, for after his resignation and the course of events taken in Moscow, there was never likely to be any other role for him to play on the world's stage, and this most chameleon of politicians was never anything if not ambitious.

At this juncture the reaction in the West should have been clear, even to the most short-sighted of politicians and their advisers devoid of the slightest knowledge of Georgian affairs - no action of any kind should have been taken until the democratic elections, scheduled for 11th October, were out of the way. This would have given everyone a chance to familiarise themselves with the internal state of a nation in which an appalling war was still in progress in South Ossetia and where the Abkhazian issue was still threatening to create difficulties. But no, two weeks before the British general election the news broke that Premier Major and Foreign Secretary Hurd had written to Shevardnadze offering BOTH the recognition of his country AND the establishment of diplomatic relations. The bandwagon was rolling and everyone was eager to get on board. Major urged recognition by the European Community and promoted Georgia's case for membership of both the IMF and the United Nations. All that could be done was done for their good old friend Shevardnadze. Meanwhile what did all this mean for the Abkhazians? Recognition of a country establishes that country's frontiers in international law. Hence, at a stroke of Western ignorance, the objections the Abkhazians had held for 61 years to being incorporated within Georgia by *fiat* of Stalin were rejected out of hand, and their subservience to Tbilisi was made irrevocable. Not surprisingly the Abkhazians, working (as already stated) quite democratically with the non-Kartvelians in their republic, were not prepared to accept this uninformed judgment of the international community and declared the restitution of their 1921-31 status on 23rd July 1992. This implied the existence of a special relationship with Tbilisi, and discussions at a parliamentary level were being held on this question in Tbilisi on 13th August. These were due to be continued in Sukhum the following day, but early on 14th 3,000 National Guardsmen with 50 tanks were sent in to put a stop to these separatist moves.

The situation is complicated by the Gamsakhurdia factor, as some of his Mingrelian supporters had kidnapped and secreted in the totally mingrelianised Abkhazian province of Gali two of Shevardnadze's ministers. This gave Shevardnadze the excuse to bring his iron fist crashing down on Abkhazia **on the pure pretext** of releasing his ministers. Had he sincerely wished merely to do this, he would have concentrated his military activities in Gali, but he did not. Kitovani, now Defence Minister, went into Sukhum with tanks and helicopters blazing in the direction of the government-buildings. For over one month a bloody battle has been waged particularly in the north of the region. We hear little reported from south of Sukhum, where mixed Abkhazian-Mingrelian villages and settlements are to be found. Given the level of hatred against the Abkhazians that ALL leading members of Kartvelian society have been whipping up since 1989 amongst their fellows, who are already notorious for exaggerated feelings of national superiority, the thought of what has been happening both in the battle-zone and to the south of the region is quite appalling. It had been Gamsakhurdia's plan in 1989 to expel the Abkhazians from all of their areas apart from Gudauta in the north and parts of Ochamchira in the south. Many of those who rushed to get involved in the fighting in July 1989 were provided with maps showing the location of Abkhazian villages (as opposed to those Mingrelian and other settlements created by Beria and his successors in the 1940s). An article in **Express Chronicle** (No.16) of 1992 suggests that the Kartvelian deportation-policy for the Abkhazians is still alive. Reports from Abkhazia speak of wanton acts of murder, rape, destruction and removal to Georgia of private property belonging not only to Abkhazians but to other non-Kartvelians such as the local Armenians -- even Shevardnadze at the Moscow ceasefire-talks admitted the occurrence of unspecified atrocities. Georgian racism extends even to the West, where an Abkhazian-owned restaurant in Paris has been vandalised since the war in Abkhazia began.

What has been the reaction of the Western politicians, who after all largely set the stage for these events by signalling to Tbilisi that they could do as they liked within their own borders -- deafening silence... Despite protests, media-reports continue to label the Abkhazians (along with the only people who have come to their aid in this time of crisis, fellow-members of the North Caucasian Confederation) separatists, Muslims and rebels, all of which nicely follows the lead set by Kartvelian propaganda.

There was never any justification for the recognition of Georgia, which, even if one excludes Shevardnadze himself from this description, is in the hands of thugs. We are told that our political leaders could not be expected to know of the Abkhazian question and that Georgia is a long way from being at the centre of our international concerns but that we are watching the situation carefully. Should not our leaders have taken the trouble to find out about possible sources of conflict before foolishly handing out recognition? If Georgia is too far away now for us to take an interest in it, why was it so close in spring that we had so precipitately to recognise it? Those being murdered, raped or robbed will no doubt find the same consolation in knowing that our governments are keeping a close watch on events as their ancestors found from having British consuls monitor their expulsion from the Caucasus to Trebizond in 1864... Even if our leaders are not big enough to admit that they made a serious mistake in granting recognition, should they not follow the dictates of conscience and condemn unwarranted aggression and possible ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia, just as they (albeit belatedly) have done in Bosnia? So why the silence? Maybe the answer given would follow the statement in a recent **Independent** leader to the effect that Shevardnadze is likely to be preferable to anyone else -- see, however, accompanying sheets. But perhaps those being robbed, raped or killed in Abkhazia will fail to appreciate **The Independent's** subtle distinction as to whether these actions are conducted under the supervision of unelected State Council Chairman Shevardnadze or (say) possible future dictator Ioseliani...

We have seen that Britain might have played a positive role in the North Caucasus in the 1830s and again in the post-Revolutionary period. The North Caucasians, especially the Circassians, know the injustices inflicted upon them by Russia in the past and do not understand why an ignorant world should consign them forever to domination from Moscow. The Abkhazians take the same view about their own claims to looser ties with Tbilisi being spurned by an uncaring world -- the British Embassy turned down a request for humanitarian aid to Abkhazia in January 1992. Both the Abkhazian leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, and the president of the North Caucasian Confederation, Yuri Shanibov, are academics, men of principle who are solely concerned with the welfare of their people. They have no personal ambitions and have been working for at least 3 years to bring peoples together according to good democratic ideals at a time when the evil of nationalism and its consequent setting of different ethnic groups at one another's throats is rampant in Georgia and threatening in Russia. What does it say about us in the West that their efforts have been spurned by our leaders, who evidently find it easier to deal with unprincipled careerists=

All Western leaders should wake up to the realities of the situation in Georgia and condemn unreservedly and immediately what is taking place in Abkhazia. Those countries like the U.K. who are still arranging an exchange of diplomatic representatives should make it clear that no representative from Tbilisi will be welcome until the fighting stops and the troops are withdrawn. Funding from the European Community, IMF and World Bank (if indeed any such has been promised) must be suspended forthwith. Georgian participation in U.N. activities must cease. Unless these measures to counteract the licence the West gave to the authorities in Tbilisi by its ill-advised actions earlier this year are taken, all those who remain silent and refuse so to act will lay themselves open to the charge of complicity with racism.

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