

Abkhazia: God's Country

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For years the darlings of the Soviet regime, the Abkhazians now face their greatest challenge: building a stable nation-state through hard work and personal sacrifice

There is an ancient legend which the Abkhazians never tire of recounting. They say that, when God had created the earth, He allocated each tribe its ethnic homeland, according to the number of its people and the services they had rendered Him.

The Abkhazian leader was the last to make an appearance and God asked, "Where were you when I was handing out the countries? I've got nothing left for you." The Abkhazian replied, "We had guests at our house, Lord, and we couldn't leave them without showing proper hospitality."

As a reward for such generosity of spirit, God gave the Abkhazians the lands that he had set aside for himself.

But this promising start has turned out to be more of a curse than a blessing. It was largely due to this abundance of natural beauty and legendary hospitality that, during the Communist period, the proportion of ethnic Abkhazians in the republic dropped from 80 per cent to just 17 per cent.

Boasting one of the few sub-tropical climates in the former Soviet Union, Abkhazia became a major producer of tobacco, tea, citrus fruits and grapes.

Most importantly, as the old joke goes, the Caucasus mountain ridge was so high that the shadow of Communism never really fell on Abkhazia. Instead, it became a destination of choice for the Soviet elite who built their heavily guarded dachas along the Black Sea coast.

However, during the Stalinist era, a process of Georgianification was set in motion with the Georgian population of Abkhazia soaring from 10 per cent in the 1930s to 46 per cent by 1952. And, despite the moderating influences of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, a huge rift opened up between the Georgian and Abkhazian political elites.

War broke out in 1992 and a series of Abkhazian victories, supported by Russian troops, forced 250,000 Georgians to flee either to Georgia or to southern Russia. The population of the republic was almost halved but only a third of those who remained were actually Abkhazian. Other major ethnic groups include Armenians, Russians and Megrelians (from the Galsky region, which borders on Georgia).

Nevertheless, the Abkhazians are today effectively the masters of their own destiny. The republic enjoys de facto independence, and has all the attributes of a nation state, including an army, border forces and customs.

Ten years ago, there was little to mark the border between Georgia into Russia. But today, the far bank of the Psou River is manned by cohorts of Russian border guards, typically puffed up with the vast importance of their work. When you cross to the opposite side, the border troops stage a truly Abkhazian welcome - full of warmth and greeting and yet politely insistent on the complex rules of local border etiquette.

The trip from the border to Sukhumi is not without its problems - petrol is wildly expensive and trains are erratic. Still, with the average wage in Abkhazia eight times lower than in neighbouring Russia, a little money goes a long way. Even the Russian tourists feel like wealthy visitors to a benighted backwater.

It is only recently that the Russians have started returning to their erstwhile tropical playground. The Black Sea resorts of Gagra, Pitsuna and Sukhumi were slow to recover from the war, when they were used as barracks for Abkhazian military units and volunteer brigades from Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Chechnya.

But, to those who remember Sukhumi before the war, today it resembles a ghost town. In the old days, Georgians, Megrelians, Russians, Armenians and even Greeks met together and drank coffee in their cafes and restaurants. Now, the streets are poorly lit and overshadowed by unkempt eucalyptus, palm and chestnut trees. There are few cars and even fewer pedestrians.

The city's bureaucracy begins work at around 10am and finishes at 11. Then most of the state workers slip away to a friend's wedding or a relative's funeral. Official duties come a poor second to the consuming passion for good company, good food and a bottle of Isabella.

And, to be fair, there is little enough for them to do. Wallowing in its political limbo, Abkhazia pays taxes neither to Moscow nor to Tbilisi. The state budget is practically non-existent and the bureaucrats have nothing to allocate. The most profitable sectors of local industry - the import of energy resources and the export of wood - are presidential monopolies. The lion's share of this income is spent on the army and the police.

Strangely enough, Abkhazia's rural communities have become the most prosperous in the republic. They can sell almost unlimited supplies of tea, tobacco and citrus fruits to the voracious Russian market.

Meanwhile, the city people understand that the rebirth of the tourist and service industries is their only hope of salvation. And yet, typically fastidious, the Abkhazians among them find the prospect of working in this sector faintly distasteful - unless, of course, it is as a director or administrator.

The Abkhazians have managed to outstrip their former Soviet comrades in many respects - there are more writers, scholars and mafia dons per capita than in any other former Soviet republic. They admire qualities of leadership and resourcefulness above all other things.

But, once the darlings of the Soviet regime, the Abkhazians have an inbred loathing of discipline, officialdom or regimented labour. There are, for example, almost no ethnic Abkhazians in the local police force - the interior ministry, with the exception of the officer corps, is made up of Armenian volunteers. Unsurprisingly then, the idea of serving tourists is anathema to them.

This innate snobbism lies at the root of today's economic problems. Caught between Georgia's open hostility and Russia's political machinations, Abkhazia is being forced to engineer its own national rebirth. But it finds itself in the position of a bankrupt aristocrat who, in order to restore his lost fortune, is obliged to swallow his pride and get his hands dirty.

The transition process will undoubtedly be slow - but there are some signs of a change in attitude. Until recently, the coastal coffee shops were full of talk about how much better life was before the war, now people discuss plans for the future with a determined pragmatism.

And, despite all their present hardships, the Abkhazians still enjoy two unique advantages - the stunning beauty of this coastal paradise and their special relationship with God, who once gave them this land.

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