
Remembering Homeland In Exile: Recollections of IDPs from the Abkhazia Region of Georgia

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The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (1992–1993) resulted in the displacement of thousands of ethnic Georgians from the Abkhazia region of Georgia. IDPs as a “mnemonic community” have a shared experience of hardship from civil wars and forced migration that somehow serves as common source of their memories of homeland. To illustrate the recollections of IDPs, the author interviewed 20 IDPs (in January 2014) living in collective centers in Tbilisi and nine IDP historians (in September 2014) affiliated with Sokhumi State University (in exile). He proposes to analyze all gathered accounts within the theoretical framework that is a useful research strategy to reflect on nostalgic idealization of pre-war Georgian–Abkhazian relationships, reconstruction of supposed reasons for the conflict, and imagining the future of reconciliation with Abkhazians. All these key elements of IDPs’ recollections and expectations generally fit into Georgian “memory project” and “national narrative”, which stress Russia’s role in fueling, escalating and maintaining the conflict. Apart from this, the author employs the theory of “communicative” and “cultural” memories to mark typically different sources of IDPs’ recollections – on the one hand, personal experience and on the other hand, institutionalized national narrative.

Keywords: IDP; national narrative; narrative template; memory project; communicative and cultural memories; memory specialist; nostalgia

The Abkhazia region – along with another breakaway part of Georgia, South Ossetia – has witnessed bloody secessionist civil wars and ethnic cleansings since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict in 1992–1993, Tbilisi lost control over the region and thousands of ethnic Georgians were forced to leave their homeland. After the brief Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, the situation became more problematic. The Russian Federation recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has tried to create so-called “new reality”, which, in fact, undermines international law on territorial integrity. After recognizing the regions’ independence, Russia’s next move was to “legalize” its presence in the areas; a whole package of defense and border protection agreements with the de-facto Abkhazia

government ‘enables the Russian military to use, build and upgrade military infrastructure and bases in Abkhazia [...] Russian forces have taken control of the security of the administrative border with Georgia along the Inguri River’ (O’Loughlin *et al.*, 2011: 6).¹ In this situation, peace processes between Georgian-Abkhazian conflicting sides have remained deadlocked and the return of IDPs² seems non-starter.³

IDPs as a “mnemonic community” have a shared experience of hardship⁴ from the war and forced migration that somehow serves as common source of their memories of homeland. However, IDPs represent a quite heterogeneous community with a complex socio-economic composition, which might affect the way they remember their homeland and view the future of reconciliation. I choose one possibility among many (there could be more differentiated perspectives depending on an IDP’s age, gender, job, place of living–region, urban or rural environment, etc.) to see the difference and/or similarities in recollections within IDP communities from distinct social positions. Particularly, I rely on the results of the two fieldworks⁵ – semi-structured interviews conducted in 2014 with IDPs living in collective centers in Tbilisi and with IDP historians affiliated to Sokhumi State University (in exile).⁶

IDPs in collective centers live more or less in similar environments and deal with the common problems of housing, poverty, unemployment and other economic and social challenges. Their memory is maintained in everyday communication with family members, neighbours and relatives within the same location or outside of it. To a certain degree, their memories, or the ways they organize recollections, are affected by official narrative, for instance, through school curricula and media. But again, their primary living environment is confined by these collective centers. On the other hand, IDP historians, given their position in the community and activities, are mainly concerned with studying, teaching and publicizing the history of the Abkhazia, Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and displacement. Therefore, the main aim of the article is to show how “ordinary” IDPs on the one hand, and historian or “memory specialist” IDPs on the other, remember and represent the same past.

I would propose to analyze all gathered accounts within the theoretical framework that allows me to reflect on nostalgic (Boym 2011) idealization of pre-war Georgian-Abkhazian relationships, reconstructing supposed reasons for the conflict, and imagining the future of reconciliation with Abkhazians. All these key elements of IDPs’ recollections and expectations generally fit into Georgian “memory project” (Zarecka 2007) and “national narrative template”

(Wertsch 2002; 2008). In this sense, the theory of “communicative” and “cultural memory” (Assmann 1995; 2008) seems useful for marking how IDPs’ personal recollections are defined and affected by institutionalized national narrative.

1. Collecting the memories: conversations with IDPs in collective centers and the University in exile

In January 2014, my research team⁷ interviewed 20 IDPs, with participants of both genders, various ages, and from different regions of Abkhazia in two collective centers in Tbilisi. Each participant remembers a unique wartime experience, some having lived near the conflict zones and some in relatively peaceful areas of Abkhazia. Secondly, I conducted fieldwork to explore the attitudes of key “memory specialists” who witnessed or actively participated in the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Abkhazia region. I chose to carry out semi-structured interviews in order to maintain an open and conversational environment. Therefore, despite the fact that I had prepared a set of questions, we did not restrain ourselves from changing the order of the questions or the way they were worded in order to encourage respondents to speak freely.⁸ In this sense, the questions were the guideline for organizing the interviews but left room for flexibility, to probe for additional information and to clarify specific issues. However, we did not change the meaning of the questions.

According to the research subject, I divided the interview into five sections: 1) How do you remember the homeland? Why is remembering important? How do you transfer memories of Abkhazia to a younger generation? 2) How do you describe relationships between Georgians and Abkhazians before and during the war? 3) What were the reasons for tension or conflict? Who is responsible for escalating the conflict: Georgians or Abkhazians? 4) What is the role of Russia in the escalation and intensification of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict? 5) How do you describe current Abkhazia? How do you imagine coexistence with Abkhazians in the future?

The same questions were designed for IDP historians but I was interested particularly in what they do as “memory specialists” to keep, transfer and cultivate memories about Abkhazia. Furthermore, I was curious whether their attitudes changed or remained the same after the two decades of the civil war. Especially, how did they perceive events and processes accompanying and following the crisis and collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the escalation of the conflict in Abkhazia in the 1990s? And how do they reflect and judge the same occurrences now? I

thought time and distance could correct their attitudes toward the reasons for Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

As I mentioned, employing the theory of “communicative” and “cultural” memories could be used as an interpretative strategy for the fieldwork results. According to J. Assmann:

[...] communicative memory includes those varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications [...] characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization. Typically, it takes place between partners who can change roles. Whoever relates a joke, a memory, a bit of gossip, or an experience becomes the listener in the next moment). There are occasions, which more or less predetermine such communications, for example train rides, waiting rooms, or the common table. (Assmann, 1995: 127)

In contrast to communicative memory, ‘cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms’ (Assmann 2008: 110–111). We are not talking here about the past investigated, for example, by archaeologists, but about the memory’s capacity to reconstruct a past that is always interpreted, learned and transferred. Therefore, Assmann partially shares the legacy of M. Halbwachs, who underlined that memory cannot preserve the past as such, but each society reconstructs the past within its contemporary frame of reference. Cultural memory refers to fateful events in the more distance past, memory of which is maintained’ through ‘cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)’. The cultural memory is always defined by a “cultivation” of reusable texts, images, rituals, and collective knowledge of the past that is specific to each society (Assmann, 1995: 129–132). An important feature of cultural memory is that the past is cultivated by “memory specialists” who, both in oral and in literate societies ‘include shamans, bards, and griots, as well as priests, teachers, artists, clerks, scholars, mandarins, rabbis, mullahs, and other names for specialized carriers of memory’ (Assmann, 2008: 114).

It would be slightly artificial to seek a sharp distinction between communicative and cultural memories. In our case, it is important to note the close relationships between personal recollections, life stories and national narrative - an objectified, institutionalized (through textbooks, museums, media, memory sites, etc.) and officially cultivated view of the past. Often, ‘written and oral memories, as well as public and private ones, intertwine and intersect. This suggests that [...] the oral/written dichotomy should not be overstated’ (Ballinger, 2003: 51). According J. Goody, ‘oral performance in literate societies’ is influenced and defined in varying

degrees by the presence of writing, which determines the existence of a fixed and shared 'society-wide code' enabling people who never met to keep linguistic communication despite the distance in time and space. In contrast to 'purely oral cultures', where communication occurs 'overwhelmingly in face-to-face situations' and all knowledge is stored in the mind (as there is no other storage option), literate cultures can consult books for references they do not remember. 'Writing establishes a conformity, an orthodoxy, as with Religions of the Book which endure unchanged over the centuries' (Goody, 1998: 73-76; 91). Correspondingly, we might suppose the Georgian memory project establishes this kind of orthodoxy in the national narrative written and fixed in history textbooks or academic works.

In the following sections of the article, I break the fieldwork results in typological sections organized around key elements of IPDs' recollections and future expectations: 1) Memory matters: "lost homeland", nostalgia and remembering pre-war peace. 2) Reconstructing the reasons for the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. 3) Perception of the current situation in Abkhazia and imagining the future reconciliations. Before this, it would be useful to expand on main features of the Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects.

2. Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects: contested representation of the past

In order to grasp the defining sources of IDPs' memories, it might worth reconstructing the origins and key elements of the contested Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects, which played decisive roles in flaming the armed conflict in the Abkhazia region. I would define the memory project as a planned, state-sponsored construction of the past and creation of coherent national narrative for strengthening the sense of unity in a society. Particularly, we can spell out several goals of the memory project: mobilizing collective memory around the key historical events from the past collectively remembered as major watersheds; establishing a coherent national narrative at all levels of social life from school curricula to political propaganda; articulating priorities within a society – what, when and why should be remembered. As I. I. Zarecka notes, 'memory projects call our attention to the fact that there is nothing automatic about entering the public record or being remembered [...] Both through explicit "editorials" and unabashed creation of new symbolic resources, many expose the presence of social and political control over memory to the public-at-large' (Zarecka 2007: 133).

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Georgian and Abkhazian historians played crucial roles in elaborating memory projects that portray the history of Abkhazia in contested ways. Actually, the “war of historians” contributed significantly to the escalation of the intercommunal conflict in Georgia’s Abkhazia region in the late 1980s. The Soviet Nationalities Policy introduced in 1923 defined peculiarities of Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects. In particular, within the policy of *Korinezastsiya* (“nativisation”) ‘a conception of nationhood was promoted in which the status of territorial homeland was fundamental’. For example, ‘the more important national groups were given the most meaningful administrative, constructional and legal expressions of nationhood in the form of union republic status’ (Smith, 1996: 7). In this context, the Bolsheviks tended to recognize the political rights of language-based cultural groups within federal state (Derluigian, 1998: 262). Thus, the Soviet Nationalities Policy created an ethno-territorial administrative division based on “hierarchical nationalism”. For instance, Abkhazians received the status of titular nationality in the Abkhazia region. They enjoyed autonomy within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia. Later, in the 1980s, autonomy served as a legitimate basis for their irredentist demands. Moreover, as T. Martin analyzes:

Soviet policy systematically promoted the distinctive national identity and national self-consciousness of its non-Russian populations. It did this not only through the formation of national territories staffed by national elites using their own national languages but also through the aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classic literary works. (Martin, 2001: 13)

He uses the term “affirmative action empire”, which ‘represents an attempt to capture the paradoxical nature of the multiethnic Soviet state: an extraordinarily invasive, centralized, and violent state formally structured as a federation of sovereign nations’ (Martin, 2001: 20). However, Fr. Hirsch opposed calling the Soviet Nationalities Policy a form of ‘affirmative action that gives preference to members of ethnic groups that have suffered from discrimination’ (Martin, 2001: 17). He argues that the term is misleading and disconnects

[...] Soviet policies and practices from their actual historical context. Soviet nationality policy was not a precursor to American race policy of the twentieth century, but rather an attempt to adapt evolutionary paradigms of the late nineteenth century to the Soviet context. It was grounded in a tradition of European thought that saw nationalism a necessary but transient phase in the development of a more universalistic identity [...] Soviet nationality policy is best understood as a policy of state-sponsored evolutionism. Its ultimate goal was not to promote “national minorities” at the expense of “national majorities”, but to speed all peoples, minorities and majorities alike, through the imagined stages on the Marxist historical timeline from feudalism and capitalism to socialism, and on to communism. (Hirsch, 2005: 103-104)

In this sense, throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, the main goals of this policy were the *sblizhenie* (“coming together”) and eventual *sliyanie* (“merger”) of the different nations in the Soviet Union through the establishment of socialism (Smith 1996: 5). Thus, the declared right for separate nations within the Soviet Union to “flourish” gave some legal status to local soviet “intelligentsia” of union republics to elaborate their own memory projects. However, these nationalistic projects did not threaten the goals of Soviet leadership to ultimately merge the constituent parts of the USSR and ‘erase all historical, traditional, legal and linguistic barriers that might impede the progression towards that end [the establishment Communism]’ (Parsons 1982: 547).

According to the Georgian memory project, Abkhazia was always an integral part of Georgian territory and culture. Apart from this, Abkhazians are culturally close to Georgians or even the people of Georgian origins whose alienation started during Tsarist and Soviet times. Contrarily, the Abkhazian Counter-Memory Project portrays a different picture of the past as a permanent battle and struggle against ethnic Georgian rivals. Local historians claim that Abkhazia was never a part of Georgia and that Georgian historians are trying to distort the past and take away the historical memory of Abkhazian people; ethnic Georgians came to Abkhazia in the wake of the region's colonization.

The key constitutive elements of both Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects revolve around the problem of primordiality in Abkhazia. In particular, claiming the antiquity of the region serves to legitimize the right to the territory. Abkhazian scholar S. Basaria declared that ethnic Abkhazians always populated this region, while Georgians came later and assimilated Abkhazians (Shnirelman 2003: 287).

Georgian historians, in turn, are also sure of the indigenusness of Georgians in Abkhazia as fact. There are two main standpoints in Georgian historiography concerning this problem. First, both Abkhazians and Georgians are indigenous, but Georgians inhabited this territory earlier. Historian M. Lortkipanidze stated that in the second millennium BC, the western South Caucasus was populated mainly by ancient Georgian tribes. Abkhazian historian I. Voronov answered his Georgian colleague, stating that ‘first of all, Lortkipanidze tries to take away the memory of her own people and second, she intends to portray the wrong picture of the past and mislead foreign scholars’ (Papaskiri 1998: 71). This reveals how the activity of historians is used as an instrument for politics of exclusion, which turns Abkhazia into contested space. In

particular, “territorialization of memory” models this region as “ethnic landscapes” or “ethnoscapes” (Smith, 1999: 150).

One of the crucial aspects of the contemporary Georgian memory project is the representation of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as the explosions of mines planted by Russia in order to ‘weaken Georgia and frustrate any attempt to escape from Russian domination’ (Kaufman, 2001: 94). Within this narrative, Abkhazians are depicted as having been “tricked” by imperial Russia into starting a war against their true “brothers” – Georgians. In a broader sense, the conflict with Russia is viewed as a historical and cultural confrontation between a democratic country and a barbarian Great Power, as a battle between David and Goliath (Toria, 2014: 321).

J. Wertsch provides theoretical considerations about the “narrative template”, an underlying general story line used repeatedly to make sense of multiple specific events.

Narrative templates are the cultural tools that mediate what can be termed deep collective memory. This form of memory is deep both in the sense that it is largely inaccessible to conscious reflection and in the sense that members of a collective tend to have a strong emotional attachment to it. (Wertsch, 2008: 49)

Apart from this, Wertsch and Georgian scholar Z. Karumidze modeled the “Georgian narrative template” that is used as a common interpretative model for various and particular historical events. They divide it into the following crucial features: 1) Georgia exists as a small, independent nation with territorial integrity at the perilous crossroads between East and West, and it seeks to remain part of the European tradition of democracy; 2) Georgia was invaded by a powerful enemy and was incorporated into a larger empire; 3) Resisting demands for allegiance to the empire, Georgians maintained their struggle for independence and democracy, and, hence, their national identity; 4) Georgia regained its independence and re-established a European-style democracy (Wertsch and Karumidze, 2009: 380). This template is used to interpret continuing confrontations with Russia, including: the annexation of Georgia in 1801; the occupation by the Red Army in 1921; the support of separatist movements by Russia in 1918-21, in the 1990s, and during the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 (Toria, 2014: 321).

Memories of Georgian IDPs fully correspond to this template but are distinguished by an emotional, intense, and dramatic representation of the history of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and displacement. Key elements of the IDPs’ “own” narrative template, whether written or oral, could be modeled in the following way. The pre-war situation in the Abkhazia region was marked by the peaceful coexistence of Abkhazian and Georgian peoples in same villages and

towns of the region. However, Russia renewed its old plan to divide Georgia and provoked the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict in 1992, which led to ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of ethnic Georgians from their homeland. I would like to illustrate how, for example, IDP historians view the war and displacement through the lens of this narrative template. Here are some examples from *Essays from the History of Georgia: Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (2012). Generally, the authors follow this narrative template, but particularly stress Russia's role in fueling ethnic phobias in the region and triggering the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. According to the essays, the Russian Federation was openly engaged in the conflict and largely affected the outcome of the war, to the extent that the 1992–1993 events could qualify as the Russian–Georgian war. Russia supported separatist movements on military, strategic, and political levels. Specifically, units of the Russian army were directly involved in military operations. Russians provided separatists with weapons, military equipment, all necessary materials, and technical resources. Russian generals trained Abkhazian soldiers and planned military operations against the Georgian army. Russian military jets bombed Sokhumi and Georgian positions, etc. (Gamakharia *et al.*, 2012: 392–400). The authors also claim that: ‘the de-facto regime [the government of this breakaway region] is a classic example of authoritarianism, military dictatorship, Abkhazian technocracy, and is an actual protectorate of Russia’ (Gamakharia *et al.*, 2012: 402). Among the authors of this collection are historians I interviewed while working on this article. In the following sections, I will show how these “memory specialists” represent the war and displacement both within the official narrative template and from the perspective of their personal experiences.

2. Mapping the memories of the displaced community

2.1. Memory matters: ‘lost homeland’, nostalgia and remembering pre-war peace

The interviewees, both the residents in collective centers and the historians, strongly emphasized the importance of preserving memories of Abkhazia. I would like to provide some vivid and expressive moments from the interviews. According to Marika from Sokhumi, ‘Georgians in Fereydan⁹ preserved their identity for 400 years and we should do the same’ (Marika from Sokhumi District, resident of the collective center in Tbilisi). This preservation of memory is passed onto those belonging to the younger generation, who are encouraged to remember that Abkhazia is the homeland of their parents and ancestors, as well their own. Lali, a teacher from

the Gulripshi district, noted the importance of stoking these feelings of attachment: ‘Whether we are awake or asleep, we always have to bear in mind Abkhazia; every day I try to encourage students to imagine and dream of Abkhazia’ (Lali from Gulripshi District, resident of the collective center in Tbilisi). Valia from Achigvara, a village in the Gali district, remarked that it is sometimes difficult to inspire younger IDPs to love Abkhazia: ‘Many of them do not remember their homeland, since they were small children during the war and then grew up in places outside Abkhazia. Many were born as IDPs and never visited their homeland’ (Valia from Gali District, resident of the collective center in Tbilisi).

Zurab Papaskiri, professor and co-director of BA and MA programs at Sokhumi State University, has been a very active public figure during and since the escalation of the conflict. He explained why the memory of Abkhazia is so “vital”:

My professional life is fully dedicated to Abkhazia. I am propagator of the idea that memories of Abkhazia must be passed from generation to generation. Throughout centuries, Jews never forgot Jerusalem, their holy land. That is unique. That is why Jews were prepared for restoration of their statehood in the second half of 20th century. We must remember and never forget Abkhazia. Abkhazian separatists wish we forgot our homeland, but we must keep the memories of our homeland. (Zurab Papaskiri)

Here, it should be noted that ‘Accounts of displacement typically refer to the story of the Jews’ exodus from Israel – which constitutes the metanarrative of exile’ (Ballinger, 2003: 51; Gilroy 1996, 207). There is even a popular practice of paraphrasing Psalm 137 within the Georgian IPD community:

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither!
If I forget you, Sokhumi, may my right hand wither!

Meri Gabedava, an associate professor put the issue in the following way: ‘We should cultivate memories of Abkhazia not only within IDP community but also in Georgian society generally. We would constantly remind people that Abkhazia is an integral part of the Georgian state and culture’ (Meri Gabedava).

The notion of the ‘lost homeland’ could have various meanings and evoke different feelings:

First it means a loss of property and sustenance. But the human-psychic loss cuts much deeper. Homeland signifies security; it forms a person’s unconscious sense of self or, as a modern discourse puts it, it forms a person’s identity. In what we call (*Heimat*)¹⁰ is bound up one’s deepest feelings of attachment, involving nature itself: memories of specific wood and meadows, of streams and shapes of buildings, smells and sounds, of everything one was once accustomed to. (Stern, 2001: 291)

We could apply this description to Georgian IPDs whose lives are ‘dramatically shaped by

displacement' (Ballinger, 2003: 49). Usually, sentiments of the lost homeland are connected to feelings of "nostalgia" and more positive recollections of life before displacement. As S. Boym puts it, 'nostalgia (from nostos return home, and algia longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy' (Boym, 2001: xiii). A typical expressions of nostalgia, among many, was found in my conversation with Valia. She said that while her son claims no sentiments about Abkhazia because he grew up in Tbilisi, she is happy that her grandson is fascinated by Abkhazia and eager to learn more about it through her colorful descriptions of home:

I picture him in our house and yard; a clear river flowing near the house; I describe the joyful childhood of his father, the soccer field where he used to play with friends. Then, he [the grandson] always says, 'Grandma, I wish we were in our village.' My stories, then, are important because they kindle a love of Abkhazia within him. (Valia from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi)

The most common expressions of nostalgia among IDPs are recollections of a harmonious co-existence with Abkhazians before the war. In pre-war Sokhumi (and other multiethnic towns and villages in Abkhazia with a mix of Georgian, Abkhazian, and other nationalities), inhabitants had good experiences and long histories of tolerant cohabitation, free of ethnic phobias. However, the war led to destruction and the forced displacement of the majority of the population. Sokhumi and other semi-deserted towns lost their traditional multiethnic face. As M. Kammen notes, 'nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt. Heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame' (Kammen, 1991: 668; Sodaro, 2013: 88). In *Refugee Women's Histories*, a similar story is told by Manana from Sokhumi. She recalls her family's life in a little street where neighbours of various nationalities – Russian, Greek, Jewish, Ukrainian, Armenian – lived as one family. As for Abkhazians, she recalls: 'We competed just in our love of Georgia. Our [Georgian and Abkhazian] friendship and trust lasted many generations' (Kukhalashvili, 2012: 13). Furthermore, according to the Conciliation Resources survey, when IDPs were asked 'whether there is more that unites Georgian and Abkhaz people than divides them, 68% completely or somewhat agreed and only a handful were in disagreement' (Conciliation Resources, 2011: 5).

Our interviewees also portrayed relationships with Abkhazians in clearly positive ways, often not mentioning any details of inter-ethnic tensions. Almost all of them believed that Abkhazians and Georgians are relatives connected by complex ties: 'Abkhazians are our closest

people; we are similar, almost the same' (Neli from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). To prove these assumptions, they provided examples from everyday life. During these interviews, I noticed that Abkhazians were characterized as close friends and neighbours, or, at least as 'welcome and desired guests' (Valia from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

Nana from the village Merkheuli of Gulripshi district describes the multifaceted relationships with Abkhazians:

We invited Abkhazians to our children's baptisms; they were close neighbours. We helped each other organize weddings or other events. If I had a guest and did not have a dinner prepared, my Abkhazian neighbour always saved me by giving me food she had prepared herself. (Nana from Gulripshi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi)

In the interviews, there were many stories of how ordinary Abkhazian and Georgian people did not want and tried to avoid conflict. Manana from Sokhumi spoke of her tangled family roots and ties:

My aunt was an Abkhazian, from Adzyubzha in the Gulripshi district. Her brother refused to fight against Georgians; he was married to a Megrelian [local Georgian]. He claimed that he could not shoot his Georgian relatives, so he left Abkhazia. But others could not escape the war and were forced to take up arms against Georgians. (Manana from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

Tamaz from Tsagera, a village in the Ochamchire district, stated that 'even during the war we managed to negotiate with our neighbours and keep things calm' (Tamaz, from Ochamchire District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

A special importance was ascribed to the IDPs' stories of Georgians and Abkhazians saving each other during the war. Izo, a former resident of Sokhumi said:

My Abkhazian neighbour saved my family and me when we went into hiding in Sokhumi after the Georgians left Abkhazia. My husband fought in the war and I was afraid that Abkhaz militants would find and kill him. When my children cried, I literally stuffed their mouths with cloth to stifle the noise. An Abkhazian man helped my husband to escape through Sochi. Then he accompanied my children and me until we were out of the conflict zone. Thanks to him we are alive now. I cannot and do not want to say anything bad about Abkhazians (Izo from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

Gia from Sokhumi also recounted a story of reciprocal assistance between him and an Abkhaz neighbour: 'I saved my neighbour. Our guys wanted to kill him. Then, he saved my parents' (Gia from Sokhumi, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

IPD historians also refer to positive relationships with Abkhazians and decline the existence of inter-ethnic tensions before the so-called "Lykhni Declaration".¹¹ For instance, Meri Gabedava

recalls the time she was a student at Abkhazian State University in late 80s: ‘When I was a student, I did not feel any discrimination. On the contrary, Abkhazian faculty members supported me on getting stipendium’ (Meri Gabedava).

Lia Akhaladze, associate professor, co-director of BA and MA programs in history, and a dean of the faculty of education at Sokhumi State University, was also a student at that time. She participated in various protest activities aimed at contradicting the Abkhazian separatist movement. However, she also refers to her Abkhazian friends with respect and even continues communication with some via social media:

I remember very warm and positive relationships with Georgian and Abkhazian students. Even after university split up, we continued to hang out with our Abkhazian friends and often drop in together at popular cafes after classes. I had never heard anything anti-Georgian from them. When the situation started to deteriorate, my Abkhazian friend told me: ‘What is going on with us? For centuries we lived together, we have shared culture, similar traditional costumes, even the same cuisine?’ Later, one of my friends died in a fight against Georgians during the massive attack on Sokhumi in March 1993. He and many other Abkhazians did not want to go to a war, but they were forced to. Otherwise, they could be declared as traitors. (Lia Akhaladze)

Otar Jordania, rector of the Sokhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University for many years, also has very positive recollections:

Even after the escalation of the situation in 1989, Georgian-Abkhazian relationships remained stable. When my father died, Abkhazians paid deep respect to his memory and came to our house to express their compassion. Then, they published official condolences in local newspaper both in Abkhazian and Russian. (Otar Jordania)

Jambul Anchabadze, an associate professor, told me that ‘right after the Sumgait massacre,¹² Abkhazians used to tell me “thank God that kind of horrible thing would never happen with us, between Georgians and Abkhazians.” Thus, Abkhazians could not even imagine shooting Georgians’ (Jambul Anchabadze).

Zurab Papaskiri recalls how the experience of long time cohabitation reconciled people even after the first bloodshed in 1989:

During the clashes of July 15th and 16th in 1989, nine Georgians and six Abkhazians died, but we quickly restored our relationship and in September, we started visiting each other in weddings or other communal events. Despite the war, I am sure we have huge potential of conflict resolution. (Zurab Papaskiri)

2.2 Reconstructing the reasons of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict

As seen above, pre-war Georgian-Abkhazian interactions were represented mainly as a peaceful coexistence of closely related ethnic communities. However, some stories differed from this

trend of congenial Georgian-Abkhazian relationships. In particular cases, interviewees stressed cultural differences and existing reasons for conflict. These differences in attitudes were expressed by respondents from areas of mixed population and from the zone of violent clashes in Abkhazia. For example, interviewees from Sokhumi, Gudauta, and Gagra had more to say about existing tensions prior to the armed conflict: ‘Abkhazians from Gudauta were different from us. They are Muslims, distinguished by aggressive attitudes toward Georgians’ (Gia from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). Similarly, Nino from Gagra remembered how during the two years preceding the war, ‘one could feel increasing tensions. For example, when riding the bus you would notice Abkhazians did not like to communicate with us’ (Nino from Gagra District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). According to Neli, from Repo in the Gali district: ‘Later on, both Georgians and Abkhazians became ethnocentric. I remember, we ended up in a situation where we, who used to be friends and relatives, did not talk to each other and became enemies’ (Neli from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). However, Izo from Sokhumi argued that ‘you could always feel national differences between Abkhazians and Georgians, but this is not unique. I think we can feel it everywhere, can we not? Even family members are different’ (Izo from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi).

Sometimes, interviewees agreed on the responsibility of political elites in inciting the armed conflict. In particular, they tended to believe that ‘irresponsible and reckless politicians from both sides dragged ethnic communities into the war’ (Neli from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). Though, according to the majority of interviewees, this conflict was orchestrated primarily from the north (Malkhaz from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). That is to say, they believed Russia played a crucial role in escalating the conflict. Badri from Gudauta said: ‘The war was planned 100 years ago by Russia. They poisoned and convinced Abkhazians that “a bad Georgian” took your land from you’ (Badri from Gudauta District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). In *Refugee Women’s Histories*, Leila from Sokhumi said of when the conflict erupted:

[...] at first everything was uncertain, but in the end it became clear that Russia was willing to occupy Georgian territory. This conflict did not start recently; it began when Georgia was conquered by Russia in the nineteenth century. Russia always tried to trick Abkhazians and set them against Georgians. This process lasted for two centuries and, finally, Russia managed to gain control over Georgian territory. (Kukhalashvili, 2012: 7–9)

Nana, from the village of Bedia in the Gali district, sums up a common idea in interviews with residents of collective centers: ‘Russia did not want our independence and tried to tear our

country apart. Russia did to us what it is doing now to Ukraine,' (Nana from Gali District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). The Conciliation Resources Survey results also indicate this attitude within the mentalities of displaced persons: 'In accordance with common perceptions of the conflict in Georgia, a large majority (80%) of IDPs believe that Russia played a major role (and only 2% saw its role as "minor")' (Conciliation Resources, 2011: 17).

As for the opinions of IPD historians, they consider the "Lykhni Declaration" as the watershed in Georgian-Abkhazian relationships leading to the gradual escalation of the conflict. However, the historians stated that the situation was not so challenging as to cause a war. The main political reasons for the armed conflict came from Russia's initial plans and mistakes made by political representatives of both Georgian and Abkhazian sides. According to Otar Jordania, 'Russia would do everything to provoke Georgia to engage in conflict. The way out became extremely difficult to find. Russia imposed its rules of game. Initially, Russia did not intervene in conflicts and helped both sides with military equipment' (Otar Jordania). What is more important, as Jordania noted, Russia had been preparing the ground for conflict for decades, that is, planting mines during the Tsarist and Soviet periods that exploded in the 1990s. In particular, Russia 'brought up local, Abkhazian intelligentsia including scholars, who gradually created and implemented the ideology that Abkhazia was always independent' (Otar Jordania).

This issue brings forth the problem of the negative role of contested historical narratives before the armed conflict. As Meri Gabedava stated, historians played crucial role in flaming the conflict. Radical scholars from both sides issued very antagonistic publications on historical topics in printed media (Meri Gabedava).

Dazmir Jojua, an associate professor, also claimed that at first, there was a 'historiographical war' and then a political conflict followed: 'Historian was the first soldier' (Dazmir Jojua).

Here, I would like to provide one interesting recollection from George Anchabadze. He is the son of a famous Abkhazian historian, Zurab Anchabadze, who also served as a first rector of the Abkhazian State University (1979–1984). Currently, G. Anchabadze is a professor at Ilia State University in Tbilisi and an active public figure distinguished by peaceful initiatives regarding Georgian–Abkhazian conflict resolution. Moreover, he is well treated in current Abkhazia and frequently visits Sokhumi to deliver lectures. He recalls the struggles in the 1980s

over the publication of the first university textbook on the history of Abkhazia. These controversies are the perfect example of the war between historians and memory projects:

In 1984 when my father suddenly passed away, he left the manuscript of the first textbook ever in the history of Abkhazia. The authors were the Abkhazian historians of the older generation including him, Giorgi Dzidzaria and Arvelod Kuprava. The manuscript was under review and about to be issued at Sokhumi State University with the support of the Ministry of Education of Soviet Georgia. However, suddenly the rivals of this book occurred both within Georgian and Abkhazian intelligentsia. During that time, when the Soviet Union was still a stable state, this kind of phenomena seemed very unusual. At the Academy of Science of Georgia, the special editorial board was created, the members of which consisted of Abkhazian and Georgian historians including me. Georgians and Abkhazians had radically different views on this book. Georgians claimed that there is no need to write separate history of Abkhazia, since Abkhazia is a part of Georgia. Apart from this, they did not like certain passages in the manuscript reflecting processes not necessarily represented within the history of Georgia. On the contrary, Abkhazians argued that there was more than enough space devoted to the relationship of Abkhazians with Georgians and the history of Georgia generally. Thus, these two groups agreed only on one issue: publication of the book should have been cancelled. I travelled back and forth between Tbilisi and Sokhumi with this manuscript and discussed various issues with historians from both sides. While talking with Georgians I tried to defend Abkhazians' arguments and vice versa, I provided arguments to support the Georgians' position when I met Abkhazian historians. Finally, the book was published as it was planned without any correction. (George Anchabadze)

As IDP historians assessed, fights erupted as a result of irresponsible political elites on both sides. Lia Akhaladze noted that 'the war started after tanks rolled in Abkhazia. That was big mistake and helped Russia to fulfill its plan. We could have avoided the war with negotiations' (Lia Akhaladze).

Zurab Papaskiri was also confident that Georgia should have avoided the military solution of the problem, despite claiming that:

Abkhazians did everything to start the war. They made so many anti-Georgian steps. Responsible government would react to these actions and take measures to normalize the situation. Separatists propagated that Georgians were immigrants and they only had a right for self-determination in this territory. Abkhaz intelligentsia created the ideology that Abkhazia should be run only by ethnic Abkhazians. That was the real reason of the conflict. (Zurab Papaskiri)

Otar Jordania also stated: 'We could have avoided the conflict. We should have negotiated on all sensitive issues. Local Georgian intelligentsia should have taken part in the mediation process, since they had a perfect relationship with Abkhazian colleagues' (Otar Jordania).

George Anchabadze believes it was quite realistic to avoid military conflict despite Russia's attempts: 'I think, we could have avoided the conflict. Russia's factor existed before and

during the war and exists now, but if we had behaved correctly, Russians would not manage to impose their provocative plans on us' (George Anchabadze).

2.3 Perception of the current situation in Abkhazia and imagining the future of reconciliation

IDPs represent the current situation in the breakaway region through a “narrative of regress”. Izo from Sokhumi painted a post-apocalyptic picture of her hometown: ‘Wilderness covered towns, villages, and streets in Abkhazia. Weeds invaded the avenue of peace in deserted Sokhumi’ (Izo from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). Interviewees assumed that Abkhazians might regret what happened because they have no political rights and their language is discriminated against:

Russians promised to create conditions for living in peace and prosperity, and for building a rich country after the expulsion of Georgians. However, [the Abkhazians] were tricked and these promises never came true. I am sure many Abkhazians want Georgians to come back but they are afraid to express this position. (Gia from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi)

Leila from Sokhumi also expressed doubts as to whether Russia will ever allow Georgians and Abkhazians to ‘reconcile after the realization of their imperialistic plan to grab the territory’ (Leila from Sokhumi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). At the same time, some interviewees believe that if the political situation were to change, Georgians and Abkhazians would work out how to live together again. Lali from Gulprishi expressed a desire for forgiveness: ‘Although they killed my father, I will never say that Abkhazians are enemies’ (Lali from Gulprishi District, resident of collective center in Tbilisi). Consequently, displaced persons believe that Abkhazians could only survive within the Georgian state. This general attitude is clearly revealed in the Conciliation Resources Survey:

A popular political argument in Georgia is that Abkhazia would, in fact, benefit from reintegration into Georgia, as its ever-closer ties with Russia threaten to ultimately undermine its political existence and cultural identity [...] 58% agree (completely or somewhat) that ‘Abkhazia cannot exist without Georgia’; only 8% disagree completely, and an additional 10% disagree somewhat. (Conciliation Resources, 2011: 19)

IDP historians as “memory specialists” focus not only on the need for keeping the memory of Abkhazia, but also on the primacy of accentuating positive memories of Georgian-Abkhazian relationships. In this regard, Otar Jordania described his own activities:

While acting as a director of the Sokhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University, the first thing I did was the organization of 150th anniversary of Giorgi Shervashidze, the son of last prince of Abkhazia. He was a patriot of Georgia as well as devoted Abkhazian. Many of Georgians

opposed me here. They thought it unacceptable to provide such an event after bloodshed in Abkhazia. My argument was that the war was tragedy for both Georgians and Abkhazians but we should not continue this confrontation. Finally, we managed to organize that event and even president E. Shevardnadze [the second president of Georgia] supported us. Moreover, we recently organized the Jubilee of famous Abkhazian historian Giorgi Dzidzaria. Many people came to this event and there was no free seat left in the Academy of Science of Georgia. Speakers expressed their warm attitudes toward this gifted son of Abkhazian people. This event was widely covered by media. As I know, Abkhazians in Sokhumi were impressed. They did not expect that from us. We should organize this kind of event more often. Of course, Russia will try to prevent our communication, but no one can completely hinder the desire for relationship (Otar Jordania).

All in all, IDP historians claim that these kinds of activities and other necessary measures, including public diplomacy, should be used to resume old connections and friendships and to restore the fallen bridge between Georgian and Abkhazian societies.

Conclusion

It is difficult to distinguish whether the assessment of political events in personal recollections of IPDs in collective centers are defined by an individual's own experience and viewpoint or by an underlying national narrative. At the level of "social identity", as J. Assmann puts it, memories are maintained in everyday communication, despite moments when displaced persons connect their own situation with "fateful" episodes from their nation's history, for instance: the frequent mentioning of Russia's plan to trick Abkhazians and separate them from Georgia; and providing analogies with Georgians from Ferydan as examples of holding on to the image and dream of Abkhazia. These are vivid manifestations of how IDPs' personal recollections are affected by memory projects that define what and how to remember. Still, we can see important differences in the memories of IDP historians and the life stories of residents in collective centers. In particular, 'there are no specialists of informal, communicative memory' (Assmann, 2008: 114). IDP historians' personal and professional "profiles" were largely made during struggles against irredentism in Abkhazia in the early 1980 and late 1990s. Therefore, as active "memory specialists", their intentions were to mobilize society and to never forget the "homeland". Their scholarly works and teaching activities closely relate to these aims. Because of these features, IDP historians' personal recollections are more organized and arranged according to national narrative.

In general, IPDs, both residents in collective centers and historians, recall the pre-war Georgian-Abkhazian relationship in mainly positive ways, though there were some stories where

respondents pointed to ethnic and cultural factors as reasons for the intercommunal tensions. However, these views did not change the main assumption that Abkhazians and Georgians are closely related peoples with a rich history and experience of living together. Therefore, according to IDPs, the conflict was caused by Russia's imperial policies, politicization of differences, and irresponsible actions by reckless politicians and members of intelligentsia, including historians on both sides. As for the perception of the current situation in Abkhazia and future expectations, IDPs believe that Russia continues to hinder negotiations and the relationship between Abkhazians and Georgians. They also claim that many Abkhazians are willing to "return back" but are afraid of expressing this position due to political conjuncture. However, if the political situation changes, IDPs expressed their readiness for reconciliation despite war wounds. All these challenge the idea of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict as a long and deeply rooted confrontation of contested communities. It is worth stepping beyond this paradigm to focus not only on the politics of ethnic exclusion, but also on the rich experience of Georgian-Abkhazian cohabitation.

Notes

1. Furthermore, the new "Russian-Abkhazian agreement", concluded on November 24, 2014, aims at redesigning the Russian-Abkhazian so-called strategic partnership. 'This agreement will bind Abkhazia to Russia politically, militarily, economically and socially even closer' (Boden 2014). However, most members of the international community continue to support Georgia's territorial integrity. Georgia, in turn, 'considers Abkhazia and South Ossetia "Russian-occupied territory", and continues to view the local authorities in place as illegal satellite regimes. Georgia's Law on Occupied Territories of October 23, 2008 criminalizes any attempt to enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Russia and any economic activity or real estate transactions in these territories not approved by the Georgian state' (Toal and Grono, 2011: 655).
2. The definition of the IDP in The Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons: 'Internally displaced person (IDP) is the citizen of Georgia or stateless person permanently residing in Georgia, who was forced to leave the place of his/her habitual residence and was displaced (within the territory of Georgia) as a result of threat to his/her or his/her family member's life, health or freedom due to the aggression of foreign country, internal conflicts or mass violation of human rights' (<http://mra.gov.ge/eng/static/47>).
3. Since the displacement, the de-facto government of the separatist region has not allowed Georgian refugees to return to their cities and villages. However, there is a significant number of returnees in the Gali district of Abkhazia; according to de-facto officials, there are as many as 60,000 Georgians in Gali, both permanent residents and those who travel back and forth over the administrative border between Abkhazia and other parts of Georgia. Before the forced displacement, the Gali district was almost entirely populated by ethnic Georgians. Consequently, most of the returnees reside in this district. Abkhazian authorities present their allowing these refugees to return as a demonstration of goodwill. Georgia, however, denies that Abkhazia is supporting an 'extensive and sustainable process' that protects the safety and dignity of those choosing to return to their homes. On the contrary, Tbilisi points to massive human rights violations occurring in the district (International Crisis Group, 2006: 9–10). On the one hand, Abkhazia considers current Gali residents as a "strategic buffer" between

conflicting parties. On the other hand, ‘many view them in the polarized post-war environment as suspect “fifth columnists” within Abkhazia, particularly given that Gal[i] residents have retained strong links with Georgia proper, where most of them travel regularly and typically retain their IDP status’ (Toal and Grono, 2011: 658). The possibility of Georgians returning to any district outside of Gali worries the de-facto government; they believe Georgians will become the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia. According to Abkhaz officials, they might create ‘instability and the potential for violence; or could “become a fifth column”’ (International Crisis Group, 2010: 9).

4. Right after the displacement, the structures of the Government of Abkhazia in exile were designed to ‘trace relatives, find accommodation, benefit from humanitarian assistance, and otherwise cope with displacement’ (International Crisis Group, 2006: 22). However, this “legitimate government” and its officials are not equipped with real and effective mechanisms to deal with the everyday problems of IDPs. Generally, IDPs face hard living and social conditions, including: problems with housing both in collective centers (public buildings, former hotels, schools, kindergartens, hospitals, factories, etc.) and private accommodations; the poverty caused by high unemployment (40% within the IDP community), miserly state allowances, and largely inaccessible social services; and barriers to obtaining a proper education, such as the inability to purchase textbooks or adequate school clothing for children (International Crisis Group, 2006: 24–25).
5. Apart from semi-structured interviews, my research methods include: the close reading and study of relevant literature, including scholarly works; and secondary or desk research of existing studies and surveys of particular organizations (for instance, the Caucasus Research Recourse Center (CRRC), Conciliation Recourses, International Crisis Group, etc.) working on the problems of forced displacement.
6. Key stages in the history of Sokhumi State University: Initially, the Sokhumi Pedagogical Institute was established in 1932. The Institute transformed into Abkhazian State University in 1979. After the Lykhni Declaration and the following events in 1989, the Georgian sector of the University with professors and students seceded and created the Sokhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University. That institution functioned in Tbilisi since the end of the civil war in 1993. In 2007, the Sokhumi branch of Tbilisi State University was reestablished again as Sokhumi State University.
7. The team, consisting of myself and my students from Ilia State University, conducted the interviews. I would like to thank them, including Nina Kvaratskeli, Salome Bekurashvili, Sulkhan Inaishvili and Lasha Ninikashvili for participating with enthusiasm in the fieldwork in collective centers in Tbilisi. My grateful thanks are also extended to my wife Maia who also took part in the fieldwork and as a sociologist gave me valuable suggestions on methods of in-depth interview. Interviewees asked us not mention their full name. Therefore I present their first name and place of living in Abkhazia prior to the war.
8. Interviewees requested the omission of their full names. Consequently, in references and citations, I present their first names and places of living in Abkhazia prior to the war.
9. As a result of the Persian invasion of the eastern Georgian region of Kakheti by Shah Abbas I in 1612, thousands of local Georgian population was forced into exile to the Fereydan region of Isfahan province. Despite forced Islamization and aggressive assimilations attempts, Fereydan Georgians maintained the Georgian language and the historical memory of their homeland.
10. Home, Homeland in German.
11. In a mass demonstration in March 1989 in the village of Lykhni, a former residence of Abkhazian princes in the late medieval period, Abkhazians, including members of the Communist elite, signed the Lykhni Declaration demanding the status of a union republic of Abkhazia, that is, secession from the Soviet republic of Georgia
12. The so called “Sumgait pogrom”, three day lootings on February 27th, 1988, resulted in killings of many Armenian residents of the Sumgait city of Azerbaijan. The pogrom occurred in parallel with the escalation of Karabakh conflict.

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