



ABĶĀZ

ABĶĀZ (also APSUA, APSNI), ethnic group of the Caucasus. The Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Republic is federated with the Georgian SSR. It comprises 86,000 square km and has a population of 486,900. Its capital city is Sukhumi, the former Sxumi. Abkhazia lies in the western Caucasus by the coast of the Black Sea. Magnificent beaches, subtropical vegetation, tea plantations, tobacco, citrus groves, deep forests, and the peaks of the great Caucasian range serve to give this land great picturesqueness. Development is energetically pursued; there is both mining and a food processing industry. Abkhazia is settled by several peoples. According to the census of 1970, the Abkhazis proper number 77,200; Georgians 199,500; Russians 98,200; the Armenians 74,800. In addition there are Ukrainians, White Russians, Jews, Ossetes, and others. In 1969 the urban population made up 42 percent of the total. Abkhazis are also found in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and the Kuban. The Abkhazi language is part of the so-called Abkhazi/Adigi or northwest group of languages of the northern Caucasus. Abkhazi is divided into two dialects, Abzhui and Bzib, the former dialect providing the basis for the literary language. The phonetics of Abkhazi is characterized by a paucity of vowels (there being only two, with variations) and a large number of consonants (about seventy). Stress plays a phonological role. Morphologically the language is agglutinative, with a highly developed system of prefixes. Along with a notably simple nominal system Abkhazi presents a particularly complex verbal system. There are two noun cases, a direct (nominative) and an oblique case, fulfilling the functions of the Russian ergative, genitive, dative, and instrumental cases. The verb has person, number, tense, mood, and potential, probable, correlative, and



causative categories. Especially complicated is the system of preverbal affixes. The Abkhazi alphabet was first established by the renowned Caucasian linguist P. Uslar in 1862 on the basis of Russian orthography. The first Abkhazi reader came out in 1865 in Tiflis. The Abkhazi people have a rich folklore, consisting of several genres: heroic epic narratives, heroic historical traditions, tales, myths, legends, lyric songs, and aphorisms. The father of Abkhazi written literature is Dmitri Guliya (1874-1960). Folk music is polyphonic; the premier place in Abkhazi musical folklore is taken up by the heroic historical epic.

Toward the end of the first century A.D., Abkhazia witnessed the coalescence of several ethno-political groups: the Abazgi, Apsil, and Sanig. Pliny (1st century A.D.) records the existence of Absili, while Arrian (2nd century A.D.) speaks of the Abaschoi. An anonymous Armenian geographer of the 12th century names the Aosil and the Apkhaz. According to Procopius (6th century A.D.), these tribes were dominated by the Laz (Gk. Lazoi). Through most of the six century, the Caucasian coast of the Black Sea was the scene of energetic rivalry between Byzantium and Sasanian Iran. According to the exigencies of the situation, the Laz oscillated between the two powerful opponents. From the 4th century Christianity had began its expansion through Abkhazia, and became the official religion in the first half of the 6th century. This development tended to swing the Laz toward the Byzantines. In the 6th and 7th centuries Abkhazia emerged as a political entity, partially dependent on Byzantium; while the Apsil and the Mismimin were vassals of Lazica (q.v.). In 532 Byzantium and Iran concluded a “permanent peace,” by whose terms Lazica was defined as a Byzantine dependency; east Georgia remained under Iranian rule. By a new treaty in 562 Iran abandoned all claims on Lazica.

In the 7th and 8th centuries, the Arabs made persistent and unsuccessful attempts to conquer the coast of the Black Sea. Christian chronicles of the 780s record how the ruler of Abkhazia, Leo II, whose mother was a Khazar princess, united western Georgia and liberated the country from Byzantine rule. In this task he availed himself of aid from the Khazars. Thus there arose in western Georgia a state known as the kingdom of Abkhazia, with its capital first in Anakopia, then in Kutaisi (Kutatisi), which was closer to central Georgia. From this time on, the term Abkhaz came to denote all the territory of western Georgia. “The kings of Abkhazia” in west Georgian and Armenian sources must be understood to mean the rulers of all western Georgia. The 9th and 10th centuries saw the Abkhazi kingdom reach its zenith. The kingdom



took an active part in the struggle for the unification of Georgia. In the 10th century, too, Georgian became the dominant language in place of Greek, which had been the language of the west Georgian church in the preceding period. At the end of the 10th century, according to Christian chronicles, the Georgian dynasty of the Bagratids came to power. Although the Abkhazi kingdom continued its formal existence as an independent political entity, in fact it became entirely subordinated to the concept of a united Georgian state, a process of formation which was basically completed by the year 1008.

Oriental sources make frequent mention of the Abkhazis. According to Mas'ūdī (II, p. 65) the Abkhazis were neighbors of the Alans. Ebn Rosta (*al-A'lāq al-naḥḥīya*, Leiden, 1892, p. 139) on the other hand defines the location of the Awḡaz as bordering the domains of the Khazars. Abkhazia often comes to denote the whole land of Georgia. Ebn al-Azraq al-Fāreḡī ("Caucasia in the History of the Mayyafariḡīn," *BSOAS* 42, 1949, p. 31) calls the Georgian King David ("the Founder," 482-519/1089-1125) "king of Abkhaz and the Georgians." Ebn Esfandiār (pp. 132, 152) calls Tāmār (580-608/1184-1212) both "queen of Tiflis and Abkhazia" and "queen of Abkhazia." A letter from Queen Tāmār to one of the Muslim monarchs (ed. M. Yūnesī, *Rawzat al-kottāb*, Tabrīz, 1970, p. XVII), written in either 1185 or 1190, bears the name "Abkhazi book of oaths." According to Yāqūt (I, p. 78) Abkhazia was a land settled by Christian folk who called themselves al-Korj. Neẓāmī Ganjāvī relates that Abkhazia and Darband were the scenes of the atabeg Eldigüz's hunting expeditions. Kāqānī explains how, "out of love for a lovely and fair-haired one I settled in Abkhazia and spoke the Georgian language." In Iran the prowess of the Abkhazi warriors was highly regarded, and they were considered as equals to both the soldiers of Daylam and Khorasan (*Sīāsatnāma*, Tehran, 1340 Š./1961, chap. 24). In this connection the testimony of Asadī Ṭūsī is interesting: "*Tamūk*," he reports, "is an arrow which was originally Abkhazi and is now produced everywhere" (*Loḡat-e fors*, ed. Dabīrsīāḡī, p. 102). Cf. Faḡr-al-dīn Gorgānī's *Vīs o Rāmūn*, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971, p. 326), who, speaking of the virtues of the beautiful Gol, says: "She affects an archer of Abkhazia in her eyes, and a scorpion of Ahvāz in her tresses."

In the reign of Queen Tāmār the feudal clan of the Shervashidze rose to the leadership of the Sukhum aristocracy; and by the beginning of the 14th century, the Christian chronicles report, they ruled the feudal kingdom of Abkhazia. In 637/1240 the Mongols conquered all of eastern Georgia, and from this period there began the long process of the breakdown of Georgian unity,



first into two states, and then into more numerous, smaller entities. The Christian chronicles relate that, in the course of the 16th century, Abkhazia had fallen into vassal dependency on the Megrel principedom. From the first half of the 16th century the Abkhazi principedom, along with all of western Georgia, became a dependency of the Ottoman Turks. The legal basis of this situation was reflected in the treaty, concluded in 1555 between the Ottomans and the Iranians, by which western Georgia and all its feudal dependencies (Megrelia, Guria, Abkhazia) fell into the hands of the Turks. Eastern Georgia remained under the influence of Safavid Iran. Turkish authority entailed a retaining of jurisdiction at the lowest levels, a breaking up of historically evolved, independent entities and restraints on the material and religious life of the people, especially with a view towards strengthening the position of Islam. Resistance to the political status quo often took the form of armed revolts, as in 1725, 1728, 1733, 1771, and 1806. Political fragmentation, feudal internecine disorders, the slave trade, and Turkish expansionism brought the Abkhazi people to the brink of national destruction. Under these conditions the only realistic possibility of relief from the threat of full ethnic disintegration seemed to be in union with the Russian state. This possibility coincided with the interests and intentions of Russia. In 1770 Prince Levan Shervashidze (Chachva) initiated discussions with General Tottleben, the representative of Empress Catherine II to Georgia, concerning Abkhazia's acceptance of a Russian protectorate. These discussions concluded without result. In the summer of 1218/1803 the ruler of Abkhazia, Kelesh Bey Shervashidze (Chachba), asked to be taken into Russian service. Russian diplomacy, surveying the international situation of this time, had to exercise great caution in its relations with the ruler of Abkhazia, since he was considered a vassal of the Ottoman sultan. The sultan, for his part, organized a conspiracy of disaffected feudal chiefs against the prince; and he was assassinated in 1808. The instigator of the deed was Kelesh Bey's own son, Aslan Bey. Kelesh Bey was succeeded by Georgii (Safar Bey), who entered into close contact with Russia; in 1810 his request for a protectorate was granted. Czar Alexander I gave him a charter by which Georgii entered into the perpetual protection of the Russian empire, while retaining the right to rule his principedom in accordance with local laws and customs. However, in terms of the goals of providing a unified administrative government for the whole of the Caucasus, the difficulties of indirect rule soon became obvious. Direct Russian rule in Abkhazia was finally introduced at the end of the Caucasian campaign of 1281/1864.



Union of Abkhazia with Russia brought the agriculture of the region into a new burst of economic development; Abkhazia gradually entered the inter-Russian agricultural system and the world-wide commodity markets. In the 1830s and 1840s the Christian chronicles report how the Abkhazis were attempting various industrial undertakings, the building of roads, a wider distribution of village agricultural products, especially wine and corn, and experiments with tobacco cultivation. But, in partnership with the local feudal lords, Czarist colonial power aroused the dissatisfaction of the masses. Peasant uprisings often tried to exploit the hostility against Russian nationals among some of the local population dominated by the pro-Turkish faction. The most severe revolt occurred in 1866, the most direct cause of which was the attempts by the government to force the peasants to buy their own land from the landlords. The revolt was brutally suppressed. In 1870 peasant rights were promulgated. A number of survivors of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 were expelled to Turkey. In 1921 Abkhazia came under Soviet control.

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