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# Sukhum(i): Multi-Ethnic Capital of the Soviet Riviera

Abkhazia's capital, Sukhumi, was once a multiethnic city, before the Abkhaz-Georgian War in the early 1990s brought about the violent transformation of the urban population. Today a certain normality has returned to Sukhumi and the scars of war are barely visible, but there remains the feeling that its multiethnic past has been lost. — S. K.

The visitor to contemporary Sukhumi cannot help but be struck by a sense of contrast between the serene beauty and tranquility of the place and its nature on the one hand and the sense that something is missing on the other. It is a small, sunny town with lush, subtropical flora and quaint nineteenth-century architecture. The stunning Black Sea coast, embankment and port dominate one side, and the enthralling white peaks of the Caucasus mountains rise up to the horizon on the other. Anton Chekhov's description from the turn of the last century is still evocative:

*The nature is surprising to a degree of madness and distraction. Everything is novel, fantasy-like, silly and poetic. Eucalyptus trees, tea shrubs, cypresses, cedars, palm trees, donkeys, swans, water buffalo, grey cranes, and, most importantly, mountains, mountains and more mountains, without end or limit. If I lived in Abkhazia for even one month, I would write fifty or more enchanting stories. From behind each shrub, from every shadow and half-shadow in the mountains, from the sea and from the sky there peer out thousands of story-lines. I am an ass for not being able to draw!*

## The city's history

The roots of the city go back to antiquity, at least to the sixth century BC, when it was the Greek colony of Dioscuria, and then a Roman trading settlement called Sebastopolis. After being sacked by Arab conquerors in the eighth century, it became the capital of an Abkhazian kingdom during the Middle Ages that was linked to the Georgian realm, when it was known as Tskhum (the name still used by the Georgian Patriarchy). The city fell to the Turks in 1578, who renamed the city Sohum Kale and rebuilt the fortress there in 1724 (the inscription plaque now stands in the yard of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul). The Abkhaz Shervashidze (Chachba) princes governed the principality of Abkhazia as Turkish vassals from 1789 until 1810, when they made overtures to the Russians. Tsarist rule in Abkhazia, as in some of the other Georgian principalities, remained indirect until the end of the Caucasus wars against the North Caucasian mountaineers and the dissolution of the Shervashidze dynasty in 1864. Abkhazia was then subsumed as a district of the Kutaisi *guberniia*. Following the Russian revolutions of 1917, Abkhazia was declared a Soviet Socialist Republic in March 1921, with the Abkhaz as the "titular" nationality as a reward for their support of the Bolsheviks in the "Sovietization" of Georgia and the overthrow of the government of the Georgian Democratic

Republic. The formal status of the republic was downgraded a year later to that of a "treaty republic" that entered the newly formed Transcaucasian Federative Socialist Republic through Georgia, and still further to an ordinary Autonomous Republic of Georgia in February 1931. All throughout, Sukhumi served as the capital city and regional hub.

Chekhov had set scenes from his story "The Duel" on the idyllic Sukhumi embankment, a location often returned to in the stories of the Abkhaz writer Fazil Iskander. Lev Trotsky, tricked by Stalin into remaining in Sukhumi and missing Lenin's funeral in January 1924, delivered an impassioned speech here from the balcony of the Hotel Ritsa. Trotsky's absence from the funeral was viewed by later historians as a key blunder that cost him the leadership succession struggle and allowed the advancement of Stalin (E. H. Carr used this as an example of the role of the accidental in history, his "Cleopatra's nose" factor, in his classic *What is History?*).

## Conflicts between Abkhaz and Georgians

Today, two decades after the brutal Abkhaz-Georgian war, the physical effects of that conflict are still evident in the burnt-out shells of the government building and the Hotel Abkhazia, and the many remaining overgrown empty lots in the city center and elsewhere. There is an eerie sense of lacking, of emptiness and something missing, of the part of the population that has vanished. According to the official censuses, the population of Sukhumi decreased fully by half between 1991 and 2011 (from 120,000 to about 62,000 persons).

It is not an exaggeration to state that Abkhazia's modern history has been driven by the factors of geography and demography, refracted through the prism of Soviet nationality policy.

The history of Abkhazia and the "ethnogenesis" of its inhabitants became fiercely contested during the latter half of the Soviet period — the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was fought by historians and ethnographers long before the soldiers and insurgents began shooting. Even the origins of the name "Sukhumi" became part of the debate, with Georgians claiming that it comes from variants of words in their languages (an outside argument links Sukhum to "sea" and "land" in Turkish). Although there is a separate Abkhaz name "Akua", the addition or subtraction of the Georgian "i" nominative ending to "Sukhumi" became a politicized issue.

Sometimes called the "Soviet Riviera," or the "Soviet Florida," Abkhazia was one of the most ethnically diverse regions of the Russian and Soviet empires (one Party

functionary described it in the mid-1920s as a “Comintern in miniature”), and Sukhumi was the point of intersection. The Abkhaz are ethnically and linguistically more closely related to the Adigei and Abaza in the North Caucasus than to the Georgians, whose language belongs to the entirely separate Kartvelian language family. Under Tsarist rule much of the Abkhaz population left for Ottoman Turkey in the 1860s and 1870s, leaving the region severely underpopulated. Subsequently, large numbers of Mingrelians, a Georgian ethnic subgroup speaking a Kartvelian language, resettled in Abkhazia from the neighboring region of Mingrelia (*Samegrelo*), particularly in Abkhazia’s southernmost district, known as Samurzaqano or Gali. This in-migration of Mingrelian Georgians intensified during the collectivization campaign and the development of large-scale state citrus and tobacco farming in the Soviet period. Yet these ethnic identities at different points in history have been more fluid than they might seem in retrospect: Mingrelians would classify themselves as Abkhaz at times when that identity was more beneficial, and vice-versa.

Although they held the key government positions, the ethnic Abkhaz were a minority in their own republic, and they were also overwhelmingly rural. According to the 1959 census, for example, Abkhaz made up only 5.6% of the population of Sukhumi. Ethnic Georgians made up the plurality of the population, and were also largely rural. Ethnic Russians made up a tiny proportion of the overall population, but they made up a very large percentage of the urban population, particularly in Sukhumi (with 36.8% in 1959, for example, they made up the plurality of the city’s population, with ethnic Georgians the second largest group, comprising 31.1%). The ethnic groups tended to be differentiated by occupation, with tobacco farming and trade in the towns conducted primarily by Greeks and Armenians, (although Georgians and Abkhazians took up tobacco production by the early 1920s), and the administration and clerical jobs were held by Russians. Abkhazians and Georgians were involved mainly in other types of agriculture or subsistence farming. During the high Stalin era Georgians had advantages in jobs and in leadership positions, while in the post-Stalin period the Abkhaz were able to solidify their place in administrative positions and in the running of the lucrative seaside resorts. During their periods of ascendancy, Abkhaz leaders often formed a strategic alliance with the urban Russians to prevent being subsumed by the Georgians. Russian was (and remains) the *lingua franca* both of government administration and of inter-ethnic commerce in Sukhumi.

Ethnic grievances accumulated during the decades of Soviet rule: the Abkhaz resented the Georgians for the Stalin-era “Georgification” policies, and then the Georgians resented the perceived privileges that the Abkhaz received as the titular nationality in the republic in the decades following. These grievances boiled over with the openness of Glasnost, and Sukhumi became the center of political contestation between the two ethnic groups under Perestroika, with demonstrations being met with counter-demonstrations that (egged on by nationalist intellectuals, such as the above-mentioned historians and ethnographers) often resulted in escalating street violence. Despite (or perhaps because of) the level of interaction between Georgians and Abkhaz in Sukhumi over the preceding century, with some exceptions this was not enough to overcome the fear and rage that took hold when the Soviet edifice collapsed and open conflict broke out in August 1992. The small Abkhaz population of the city initially fled north to Gagra and Gudauta, and Sukhumi became the center of

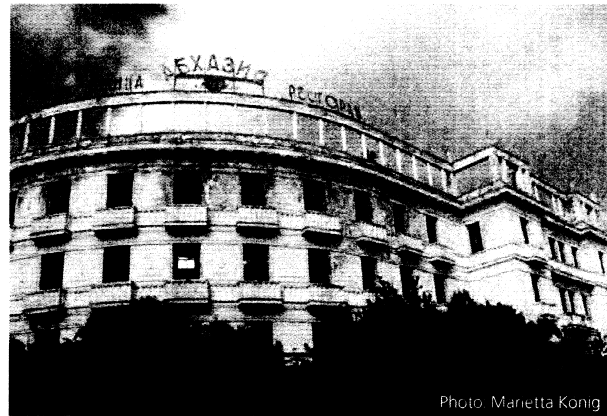


Photo: Marietta König

The remains of Hotel Abkhazia.

the Georgian military effort and was held by the Georgians until the very end of the conflict in September 1993, when the Abkhaz forces broke a cease-fire and seized the city with the help of the Russian military. The Georgian population was forced to flee Abkhazia, and although many of the Georgian residents of the southern Gali region eventually returned, the Georgians from Sukhumi were never able to do so, and their properties either remain desolate or have been taken over by new residents.

#### Lost diversity

Demography and geography continued to be key factors in blocking resolution to the conflict. Territorial settlements involving conceding the Georgian-populated Gali region could never be considered seriously by the Georgians so long as Sukhumi was excluded, while for the Abkhaz allowing the return of the Georgian IDPs to their homes in the capital would have made them an insecure minority again. Ideas for a territorial compromise with Sukhumi as a divided city like Jerusalem were thrown around from time to time, but apparently never taken very seriously by either side.

Recognition as an independent state by Russia and a handful of other countries following the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 has all but settled the question of status as far as the Abkhaz are concerned, and have added a sense of stability that has led to increased investment and tourism from Russia and to a consolidation of local statehood (including a democratic transition of power through elections). While the tourists are primarily drawn to the resort towns of Pitunda and Gagra to the north and the monastery and cave complex at Novy Afon, the Sukhumi embankment swarms with holidaymakers in the summer period. Preparations for the upcoming 2014 Olympics in nearby Sochi have also given the local economy a boost.

Except for the still-charred remains of the shelled-out government building, Sukhumi has regained the charm and pleasantness that so enthralled Chekhov. Yet a much different Sukhumi exists in the memory and imagination of those forced to leave, and for whom it is so close yet entirely (and seemingly eternally) inaccessible. A new generation of Georgian IDPs with no firsthand experience of Abkhazia is now reaching adulthood. The Abkhaz, in turn, have gained security and political control, yet in sacrificing its diversity the city has sacrificed one of the key aspects of its vibrancy.

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