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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

