

Bridging Divided Communities through the “Chosen Traumas” of the Wars: A Nation-Building Project in de facto Abkhazia

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Abstract

This paper studies a nation-building project through the lens of memory politics in the de facto state of Abkhazia. It explores the strategies employed by the Abkhaz elite to bridge the divided Abkhaz communities - descendants of the *Muhajirs*¹ with the population of Abkhazia, and forge a unified national identity between these groups. The paper argues that, in order to overcome the divide, the Abkhaz elite utilizes the trauma of the Russian-Caucasian War (1817-1864), intertwining it with the memories of the Georgian-Abkhaz War (1992-1993), and frames both events within a broader context of heroism, courage and resistance to colonial powers, in this narrative represented by Russia and Georgia. By drawing an analogy between these two historical events, the elite fosters sharing *chosen traumas*, which encourages solidarity and supports the development of a renewed sense of national unity. However, the slow pace of repatriation and its limited impact on the demographic transformation of Abkhazia raise questions about the long-term success of the Abkhaz elite's national project beyond the realm of memory and symbolism.

Keywords

Abkhazia, memory politics, divided nation, Muhajirs, chosen trauma, historical analogy

On September 27, 2010, a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Russian-Caucasian War was opened on the Black Sea coast, Abkhazia. The sculpture,

1 The term “muhajir” refers to individuals who were expelled from the Caucasus in the 19th century following the Russian-Caucasian War. Derived from the Arabic word for “exile,” it referred to those who fled to the Ottoman Empire, particularly to Turkey, before dispersing to various parts of the world. Today, a large portion of their descendants reside in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and Russia. These individuals largely make up the Abkhaz diaspora abroad, and in this text, the terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘descendants of the Muhajirs’ are used interchangeably.

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created by Abkhaz sculptor Gennady Lakoba, depicted a rider fallen from his horse in a moment of defeat, yet his clenched fist was raised in defiance. According to Lakoba, his portrayal of the national tragedy captured not only the sorrow of the past but also a hope that, despite the suffering, the Abkhaz nation will one day rise again (Grigorian 2010). The date chosen for the memorial's opening, September 27, carries profound significance. It marks the commemoration of the liberation of Sukhumi from Georgian forces during the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. By opening the monument on this day, the Abkhaz political elite, led by Sergei Bagapsh, sought to revive the narrative created by the first president of de facto Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, in 1992 and draw parallels between the Russian-Caucasian War (19th century) and the Georgian-Abkhaz War (20th century). Despite the temporal and contextual differences between these events, both are embedded in the national narrative of resistance, courage, and heroism.

What strategies do the Abkhaz elite employ to unite the divided nation and forge a cohesive national identity? And to what extent has this new endeavor for nation-building in the de facto Abkhazia been successful? - I explore these questions through the theory of memory studies. Concepts such as Vamik Volkan's "chosen trauma" and Eviatar Zubavel's "historical analogies" are particularly useful to explore how events separated by time and space are framed within common cultural patterns and are integrated in memory politics in the de facto state to cultivate a shared collective imagination among members of a divided nation. I also evaluate the resonance and consequences of the memory strategy, shedding light on its influence on the repatriation processes.

The methodology of this study presents certain limitations concerning source selection. Due to the author's ethnicity, direct ethnographic fieldwork or interviews with local Abkhaz communities were not feasible; consequently, the research relied exclusively on online sources. The main data were drawn from the Abkhaz online press and the digital library Apsnyteka.

Three Russian-language online publications were monitored: pro-government *Apsnypress*, relatively independent *Ekho Kavkaza*, and the pro-Russian *Sputnik Abkhazia*. The use of Russian, widely spoken and officially recognized in Abkhazia, mitigated linguistic barriers in press analysis. The press's observations revealed that *Ekho Kavkaza* provided critical and reflective perspectives on the war's memorialization. In contrast, pro-government and pro-Russian sources predominantly provided brief, descriptive coverage, often lacking political context or civic engagement. Therefore, *Ekho Kavkaza* was selected for its particularly relevant coverage of the memorialization of both events.

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The analysis was conducted in January and February 2025. A search for “Russian-Caucasian War,” refined by the keywords “May 21,” “May 31,”² and “Abkhazia” yielded 18 articles related to commemorative practices. Similarly, a search for the “1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz War,” using the keywords³ “August 14,” “September 27,” “September 30,” “Tragedy in Lata,” and “March Offensive,” “Abkhazia,” resulted in a selection of 34 relevant articles. Commemorations of the Georgian-Abkhaz War on this platform primarily center around August 14, marking the outbreak of the war; September 27, the liberation of Sukhumi by Abkhaz forces; and September 30, celebrated as the day of victory over the Georgian army. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the official memorial dates, supplementary sources, primarily the pro-government Apsny Press, were also examined.

The selected texts primarily shed light on the political narratives and positions of Abkhaz intellectuals and the political elite, who actively revive and reinterpret the memory of the Wars, emphasizing their ongoing significance in shaping future-oriented identities and political agendas. The analyzed materials span from the earliest articles of 2010 to 2024. Due to overlap and repetition of information across sources, the analysis focused only on selected content.

Apsnyteka, a digital library encompassing materials from the 19th century to the present, proved essential for conducting a retrospective historical analysis. Between October and November 2024, research focused on the archive’s history and literature sections. In relation to the historically distant event - the Russian-Caucasian War, the search yielded poetry, historical monographs, and literary fiction. Materials concerning the Georgian-Abkhaz War and its broader context were significantly more abundant. The selection prioritized works by leading historians and collections of political documents that continue to shape contemporary Abkhaz discourse. Although Apsnyteka also contains materials in Turkish and Abkhaz, these remained inaccessible due to language constraints.

To examine the mobilization of descendants of the Muhajirs and the repatriation process, the digital platforms linked to the Abkhaz diaspora were also examined. In early March, the Instagram page *Insta Abkhazia*, which highlights the experiences of the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora, was studied. This

2 The Russian-Caucasian War was commemorated on May 31 from 1990 until 2011, before Abkhazia joined the memorialization practices of other North Caucasian peoples, who observe this day on, May 21.

3 These dates and events are often mentioned by Abkhaz online media. I also became familiar with them during my time as a volunteer with the Tbilisi peace platform *16th Element*. Tragedy in Lata refers to the downing of a Russian helicopter, evacuating civilians from the city of Tkvarcheli. The March Offensive refers to the battle that took place at the Gumista Bridge during the 1992–1993 war. The Abkhaz regard it as the most tragic military operation of the war.

was complemented by two interviews with Muhajir descendants, cited by *Ekho Kavkaza* and *Jam News*. Given the limited availability of such content, only these two sources were incorporated. The study also explored the role of the *International Abkhaz-Abaza Congress* as an intermediary between diaspora communities and the Abkhaz political leadership. Furthermore, Abkhaz history textbooks from 2007 and 2015 were reviewed to assess how the Russian-Caucasian and the Georgian-Abkhaz Wars are depicted in educational narratives.

This study explored whether these two historically distinct events are discursively linked across political, literary, historical, and media narratives, and how the Abkhaz elite uses these links to advance nation-building goals.

The analysis reveals that the Abkhaz elite construct a historical analogy between the two Wars, using shared themes of resistance to imperial domination, courage, and heroism of the Abkhaz to foster a cohesive national identity and bridge fragmented collective memories among dispersed communities. Despite this linkage, explicit references remain rare due to geopolitical factors. While Georgia is openly portrayed as an adversary, Russia's dual role - as both former colonizer and present-day protector restricts direct references to it as an enemy. Instead, the connection is communicated through culturally embedded symbols and narratives, which the Abkhaz become familiar with through school education and memorialization practices. No counter-narratives to the dominant account in either the online press or Abkhaz literature were found, indicating a broad societal alignment with the elite-driven memory framework.

The first section of the paper offers historical context and outlines the distinct features of the wars, demonstrating their differences in terms of chronology, geography, key actors, and historical context. The second section examines how these events are framed using similar narrative patterns, contributing to a perceived resemblance between them. The third section shows the analogies constructed around these conflicts, uncovering the underlying memory strategies and the political instrumentalization of collective trauma. The final section focuses on the repatriation process, highlighting both the power and the limitations of memory politics in the ongoing project of nation-building.

Conceptual Framework

De facto states emerge through secession from a parent state and are governed by political leadership that has secured public support and established an independent governance framework for the population within a defined territory. While they maintain core attributes of statehood over a sustained period, they continue to lack formal recognition and remain illegitimate

in the eyes of the international community (Dembińska 2023). Numerous authors examine their resilience and explore their capacity to forge economic, political, and other forms of engagement with international actors (Kolstø 2006; Dembinska & Campana 2017; Blakkisrud et. al. 2021). Additionally, recent studies highlight the nation-building processes undertaken by the elites of de facto states, emphasizing their efforts to construct national identities with both symbolic and political significance (Kolstø & Blakkisrud 2008). This factor is also considered one of the mechanisms for strengthening internal legitimacy and justifying the existence of limited statehood in the absence of external recognition (Bakke et al. 2014).

Abkhazia is a de facto state that is considered a de jure part of its parent state, the Republic of Georgia (Miklasová, 2024). The Georgian political elite views it as an occupied territory and seeks to restore the Republic’s territorial integrity (Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories, 2008). Furthermore, Abkhazia faces tensions with the patron state, the Russian Federation, which recognized its independence in 2008. Russia’s recurring attempts to integrate Abkhazia into the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) have consistently been rejected by Abkhaz (Kriveniuk 2010). In this context, the de facto state aims to establish internal legitimacy and build an independent Abkhaz nation, viewing this as crucial to maintaining its status. By integrating the descendants of the *Muhajirs* into this process, the Abkhaz aim to both expand the ethnic Abkhaz population and utilize the international connections these communities offer, which are especially significant in the context of the region’s international isolation.

Nation-building in Abkhazia has attracted considerable scholarly attention, primarily through economic and political perspectives (Bakke et al. 2014; Ó Beacháin 2016; Peinhopf 2023). Some research also approaches the topic from an ethnosymbolist standpoint (Dembińska 2023). However, the efforts of Abkhaz elites to bridge divides between communities, both within Abkhazia and beyond it, remain largely underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing the Abkhaz elites’ project of uniting the divided Abkhaz nation through memory politics.

The creation of shared memories of the past is a critical element of nation-building (Smith, 2003; Anderson, 2006). This process is facilitated by political elites through the mediation and transmission of events and figures, often in the form of material objects, texts, symbols, or ceremonies (1989). For memorialization, political elites must assess the relevance of historical events for contemporary use (Verovšek 2016; Simons 2023). The current political agenda and context often play a key role in determining the cultural framing needed to evoke emotional resonance from the public. Selecting relevant

events from national history based on these frames is not a particularly difficult task (Assmann 2015; Beiner 2000). By depicting past events through these frames, the group members see their ancestors' deeds as a meaningful context for future scenarios (Hirschberger 2018).

By revisiting historical events marked by tragedies and losses while also emphasizing survival and rebirth, the Abkhaz elite cultivates a shared understanding about the Abkhaz nation as courageous, ready to resist imperial powers, and willing to make sacrifices for the future of their people and homeland. This narrative reawakens a sense of unity among the Abkhaz community, both within and outside of Abkhazia. The Russian-Caucasian and the Georgian-Abkhaz wars are regarded as traumas in the Abkhaz national narrative, as they deeply impacted the collective consciousness of the Abkhaz and irrevocably altered their national identity. According to Alexander (2004) and Sztompka (2004), the imprinting on the social fabric of a society and the alteration of its collective identity are key factors in perceiving events as traumatic. Moreover, these events fit within a specific construct, which Vamik Volkan terms 'chosen trauma'. These are mental representations of tragic events shared by all members of a group, passed down through generations "to mourn the loss and reverse the humiliation" (Volkan 2001: 87). Over time, a chosen trauma evolves from being a mere memory or historical event into a defining element of group identity. Based on Volkan, it becomes activated particularly when the nation "is involved in an immediate conflict or has gone through a drastic political change and needs to reconfirm or enhance its identity" (Volkan 2001, 88).

In the case of Abkhazia, the Russian-Caucasian and the Georgian-Abkhaz Wars are framed as "chosen traumas" because they involve the two principal actors - Russia and Georgia - who Abkhaz perceive as threats to their national project and against whom they have sought to assert and defend their collective identity. This framing is deeply rooted in historical and geopolitical realities. During the Soviet era, the Abkhaz forged their national identity largely in opposition to the Georgian national project (Blauvelt 2014).

The Georgian-Abkhaz War is often portrayed as a victorious struggle, a successful defense of Abkhazia's identity and territory. In contrast, the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War is shaped by defeat and exile. However, in both cases, the Abkhaz cast their historical experience within a heroic narrative - either as a heroic victory or a heroic defeat against the Empires. The foundation of this heroism lies in courage and resistance, leading to great sacrifice. However, it is portrayed as essential to the survival and continuity of the Abkhaz nation. Georgia is depicted as the principal adversary, whereas

attitudes toward Russia remain implicit and are articulated through symbolic means, due to its current role as Abkhazia’s protector and guarantor of its de facto independence.

The way these events are framed reveals an Abkhaz mnemonic strategy aimed at unifying distinct historical episodes under a shared thematic framework. This invites a reading through Zerubavel’s (2003) concept of historical analogies. Collective memory does not automatically impose coherence on the past; rather, as Zerubavel explains, it is shaped through mechanisms such as commemorative calendars, symbolic sites, origin myths, and genealogies, which link past events to present political agendas. In the Abkhaz context, this process is particularly evident in the construction of historical analogies that emphasize structural or symbolic similarities between the Russian-Caucasian War and the Georgian-Abkhaz War. As Zerubavel notes, this reflects a ‘tendency to view the past as somehow ‘similar’ to the present’ (2003: 48). In this approach, events that may appear unrelated are often incorporated into the politics of memory under a common pattern. This is the reason why members of society “do not feel constrained by the considerable temporal distance often separating past signifiers from their corresponding present signifieds. Their evocative power is much greater, however, when the cultural affinity between the two helps offset such distance” (Zerubavel 2003, 50). The primary goal of using analogies is to activate memories and prevent repeating past mistakes. As a result, past traumas often function as “scare tactics” (Zerubavel 2003).

The use of analogy helps explain the logic behind linking two pivotal events in the national narratives of the Abkhaz within contemporary memory politics. The Abkhaz elite connect the chosen trauma of the Russian-Caucasian war, which continues to influence the identity of the descendants of the Abkhaz *Muhajirs*, to the more recent experience of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. This connection positions them not as a distant or disconnected group but as an integral part of the modern Abkhaz national project. By emphasizing the shared historical experiences of both groups, the elite seek to cultivate a sense of unity that bridges the physical distance between them. Through this strategy, the Abkhaz elite aim to inspire a collective vision for the future, with the idea of a unified Abkhaz nation, resilient in the face of external threats, has been resonating both within Abkhazia and among the descendants of the *Muhajirs*.

Historical Background and Distinct Characteristics of the Wars

Abkhazia became part of the unified feudal Georgian kingdom in the 10th century and officially remained its principality throughout the Middle

Ages. However, in the 16th century, Ottoman invasions and the spread of Islam in the region cut off Abkhazia's connections to Georgian culture (Anchabadze 1959). From the 19th century, the Russian Empire took on a similar role. By replacing the Georgian alphabet with a new script for the Abkhaz language (Gvanttseladze & Chaava 2021), socializing Abkhaz children in Russian schools (Soxumeli 1905), and promoting narratives that Abkhazia was distinct from Georgia (Kovalevskiy 1867), it severed ties with the Georgian and Abkhaz elites at a time when the Georgian national project was taking shape.

In the 19th century, Abkhazia was considered a Russian colony, similar to other regions in the South Caucasus, where the empire employed soft power to control peoples who had been previously conquered by military force (Chkhaidze 2003). However, because of the strong Islamic sentiments among the Abkhaz and periodic resistance from the local nobility, a different approach was taken in this area, similar to the North Caucasus, where the Russian Empire encountered stronger resistance than in the southern regions. This resistance from the North Caucasian mountaineers to the Empire's colonial policies culminated in the Russian-Caucasian War (1817-1864). A widely held view suggests that the core of this resistance was a movement rooted in religious doctrine, which advocated for the creation of an Islamic state for the united peoples of the region. This vision materialized with the establishment of the *Caucasian Imamate* in 1829-1830. Under the leadership of its third Imam, *Shamil*, the ideological foundation for the holy war, or *Gazavat*, was laid, drawing a significant portion of the North Caucasian peoples into the struggle (Anchabadze 2018). The central battles occurred in the 1850s. Imam Shamil was defeated, lost his power, and surrendered in 1859. By 1864, the Caucasian War had officially come to an end. The defeat of Imam Shamil weakened resistance in the North Caucasus, forcing the mountain peoples to abandon their territories and resettle in the Ottoman Empire (Dzidzariia 2017).

The role of the Abkhaz in Imam Shamil's campaigns remains uncertain, as the Abkhaz principality itself was independently engaged in resistance against the Russian Empire, evidenced by sporadic uprisings and acts of defiance. This resistance led to several waves of exile during the 1860s and 1870s (Dzidzariia 2017). Although Abkhaz did not align with the idea of establishing an imamate, they had pro-Turkish sentiments, which the Russian Empire viewed as a threat, especially during the Russo-Turkish wars. As a result, the Abkhaz were regarded with suspicion and labeled as a "guilty" population (Lakoba

et al. 1991). These events are understood in modern Abkhazia as part of the ongoing legacy of the Russian-Caucasian War, with exiled Abkhaz (muhajirs) referred to as victims of this war. However, in the 19th century, the Russian Empire presented a different portrayal of the deported people. Russian clergy, who were key supporters of the Tsar in the Caucasian colonies, framed Abkhaz resistance as opposition to the Christian faith, viewing the exile of the Muslim population as a divine punishment (Kavelin 1885). By using religious arguments and accusing the Muhajirs of having disloyalty to the Tsar, the Russian Empire prevented any attempts by these people to return to their previous homes. Except for certain members of the upper class, Muhajirs were prohibited from settling near the Black Sea coast, residing in Sukhumi, or living in the towns of Gudauta and Ochamchire (Lakoba & Bgazhba 2007). The remaining population in Abkhazia came under the influence of narratives shaped by the prevailing ideologies. While individual mourning rituals may have been preserved in oral traditions, the trauma of the Muhajirs was not officially acknowledged or mourned before the Soviet era.

In contrast to the Russian-Caucasian War, the Georgian-Abkhaz War represents a more contemporary chapter in history. While numerous factors contribute to the origins of this conflict, one of the most significant is the legacy of Soviet-era nationality policy, which supported the emergence of competing national projects between Georgians and Abkhaz (Kemoklidze 2016).

As part of its national strengthening initiatives, the Soviet government actively supported the formation of the Abkhaz nation. However, beginning in the 1930s, the policy of political centralization gradually eroded the Abkhaz people's national rights. This gradual disenfranchisement caused deep resentment among the Abkhaz and sparked resistance to the Soviet Georgian national project (Blauvelt 2020). Within the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it became increasingly clear that the Abkhaz no longer saw any possibility of coexistence with the Georgians within a unified state. The rising nationalist movements on both sides intensified tensions, culminating in open conflict in August 1992 (Nodia 1998). Over the course of a year-long armed struggle, Abkhazia gained military dominance with the help of North Caucasian people and other volunteers. On September 27, 1993, after securing victory in Sukhumi, it declared its independence and seceded from Georgia. In Abkhazia, this war is referred to as the Patriotic War (Apsny Press 2023).

Unlike the narrative surrounding the Russian-Caucasian war, which was primarily expressed through personal and family networks, mostly in musical form (Lakoba et al. 1991), the Georgian-Abkhaz war quickly gave rise to a national narrative that framed the conflict as a resistance against Georgia.

During the war, the Abkhaz began to present themselves as victims in an effort to garner international support. They managed to mobilize fighters from across the Caucasus and diaspora to join their cause (Amkuab 1992). After the war, the Abkhaz mourned their losses, with the pain and sacrifices of the conflict becoming a central part of their collective memory. This is evidenced by the fact that many monuments and memorials were built to honor those who died, and perhaps no other event in Abkhaz history has inspired as much academic and artistic attention as this war.

Chosen Traumas of the Divided Nation

Muhajirstvo quickly became a chosen trauma for the deported Abkhaz, who passed down their experiences to their children, holding onto hopes of returning to the ancestral lands. However, all attempts at repatriation proved futile, and over time, the Muhajir narrative became a key marker of identity for Abkhaz in the Middle East. This is evident in the interviews with the members of the Turkish diaspora, who felt a deep connection to Abkhaz culture and endeavored to preserve the traditional practices and historical memory of their nation (Ardzinba 2019). Interviews with the children of diaspora groups in Europe, who emigrated from the Middle East, support this observation. During annual cultural gatherings organized in Germany by the descendants of muhajirs, they refer to each other as brothers and sisters, asserting that their primary identity is Abkhaz and that they do not feel a sense of belonging to any other society (Zavodskaya 2019).

In contrast, this tragedy was not publicly expressed among the Abkhaz in Abkhazia. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, historical or literary narratives addressing the tragedy of the *Muhajirs* and the nation's division were absent. As noted by Abkhaz historians, the earliest expressions of this trauma emerged in musical form. These sorrowful narratives, now collectively known as "The Muhajirs", were preserved in songs and legends marked by profound grief and melancholy (Lakoba et al. 1991). It was not until 1923, during the implementation of the Soviet national-strengthening policy of *korenizatsiia*, when Tsarist imperial practices were officially condemned as examples of "Great Russian chauvinism" (Martin 2001), that the theme of exile first appeared in published literature. That year, the Abkhaz released a small poetry collection by the Russian Symbolist poet Vladimir Strazhev titled *Gorst'* (Sadness), which included the poem "Muhajir." The poem poignantly conveyed the sorrow of forced displacement and the longing to preserve memories of the homeland during the journey to Turkey (Strazhev 1923). The theme of exile resurfaced more prominently in 1940, when Abkhaz

national poet Bagrat Shinkuba wrote the poem ‘Sh’ish-Nani’ (Lullaby of the Muhajirs), later translated and republished in Russian in 1959. In this work, Shinkuba portrayed the national tragedy of the Abkhaz and other Caucasian peoples, while expressing hope that one day the child of a muhajir would return to their ancestral land and remember the deeds of their forebears (Shinkuba 1959). The poem aligned with the Soviet ideological climate of the time, which acknowledged Russian colonialism but framed it as a lesser evil in comparison to other imperial powers (Gammer 1992).

Shinkuba’s perspective on the Russian-Caucasian War was later depicted in his novel *Posledniy iz ushedshikh* (The Last of the Departed, 1978). In this work, the author explored the Ubykh people’s resistance to Russia and their history of exile, while also addressing the tragedy of the Abkhaz. At the end of the novel, Shinkuba emphasized how the Soviet system had failed to address the deported Abkhaz’s longing to return to their historical homeland. He argued that the fate of the muhajirs was permanently bound to the lands in which they had settled, having lost their homeland through emigration. Shinkuba likened this loss to death, a comparison that serves as a symbolic representation of both the division of the historical land and its people, as well as the nation itself (Shinkuba 2014). A few years later, in 1982, Giorgi Dzidzaria’s monograph *Muhajirstvo i problemi istorii Abkhazii v XIX veke* was published, linking Muhajirstvo to the Russian-Caucasian War. The author argued that the War marked the beginning of a large-scale exile movement, with various Caucasian peoples being displaced at different times, and that the exile of the Abkhaz Muhajirs was a direct consequence of this war (Dzidzariia 2017).

These texts predated the “explosion” of memory within the Soviet system. They played a crucial role in paving the way for the shift of hidden and unspoken traumas related to the colonial past from private to public discourse. This process was also facilitated by the fact that the descendants of the Muhajirs started visiting Abkhazia in the 1970s and 1980s, making their group’s memory accessible to the local population. Regarding this issue, an Abkhaz poet, Gennady Alamia, remembered that the Soviet system treated the descendants of the Muhajirs with hostility, persecuting them, denying permission to relocate to Abkhazia, and even preventing them from staying in hotels. According to Alamia, their arrival fostered a desire among the Abkhaz population in Abkhazia to publicly commemorate the victims of the Russian-Caucasian War (Sharia 2021). Abkhaz psychologist and Soviet-era activist Arda Inal Ifa further noted that the memorialization of the Russian-Caucasian War began with the demand for the return of the descendants of

the Abkhaz Muhajirs to their homeland, and this idea was openly promoted by the cultural elite and youth of Abkhazia since the 1980s (Sharia, 2022).

The turning point in memorialization policy came after perestroika, when the Abkhaz began to openly commemorate the Russian-Caucasian War and the *Muhajirstvo* associated with it in the public space. From this time, these experiences began to emerge as *chosen trauma* for the Abkhaz population. However, resources for commemoration were limited, and the Abkhaz lacked the means to organize large-scale memorial events. As a result, the remembrance was confined to symbolic gatherings. Efforts to establish sites of memory were primarily driven by citizens involved in national movements. They petitioned the Abkhaz Regional Committee to recognize “The Day of the Victims of the Russian-Caucasian War”. Although officials were cautious in their response to these requests for memorialization, they were unable to prevent it. According to Arda Inal Ifa, the first ceremony took place on the Sukhumi embankment, where participants brought wreaths and candles to honor their ancestors (Sharia 2022). The first memorial stone was also placed in 1990 at the site where citizens gathered. May 31 was chosen as the official day of remembrance (Sharia 2022). From this point onward, the Russian-Caucasian war is framed as a *chosen trauma* for the Abkhaz population. It has become a central element of being Abkhaz and found its place in history textbooks, signifying the elite’s effort to pass it down to future generations.

Unlike the Russian-Caucasian War, the framing of the Georgian-Abkhaz War as *chosen trauma* began during the conflict itself, as Abkhaz historians chose to portray it. However, it predominantly reflected the experiences of those living in Abkhazia, with less emphasis on the Abkhaz in the Middle East, except for those who volunteered. In Abkhazia’s national narrative, the war was depicted as a liberation struggle against the “mini-empire” represented by Georgia, which, from this viewpoint, aimed to continue the policies of the Menshevik government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia and Stalin-Beria following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Sagaria et.al. 1992; Lakoba 2001). In the aftermath of the war, Abkhaz historians constructed a narrative linking disparate historical events and periods to portray a continuous pattern of discrimination. This framing positioned the Abkhaz as long-standing victims of a century-long Georgian national project. The war against Georgians was framed as an effort to break this historical cycle (Sagarija 1995; Marykhuba 2004). This narrative was institutionalized in 1997 when the Abkhaz elite issued a resolution *on the legal assessment of the genocide against the Abkhaz and other peoples living in Abkhazia, as well as other repressive measures carried out by the Democratic Republic of Georgia and Soviet Georgia*. The document

accused the modern Georgian authorities of chauvinism and the continuation of the colonial policies of previous governments. The text presented a heroic element, asserting that the war was the end of Georgian colonization. This document effectively shaped the post-war discourse in Abkhazia, positioning it as a political program and defining the sole guarantee for the physical and ethnocultural survival of the Abkhaz in the region (Marykhuba 2004).

Numerous sites of memory have been established in modern Abkhazia to honor the Georgian-Abkhaz war, and this process continues to evolve. Significant dates in the national calendar include - August 14, the day the war began (Pegov 2011); August 15, Volunteer Day, to honor those who supported the Abkhaz during the war (Apsny Press 2022); March 15, to commemorate the Battle of the Gumista Bridge (Sharia 2019); August 30, dedicated to the memory of the missing persons, whose fates remain unknown to their families (Ekho Kavkaza 2014); September 27 is the most important date for the Abkhaz, marking the Liberation of Sokhumi (Zavodskaya 2018), while September 30 marks the Final Victory over Georgians (Ekho Kavkaza 2018); December 14, is observed in memory of those who died in Gudauta in 1992 (Apsny Press 2024). Additionally, since December 16, 2024, a public ceremony has been held to honor Kavkaz Atrishba, a descendant of the Muhajirs from Turkey, who fought to support the historic homeland during the 1992-93 war (Apsny Land 2024).

In addition to commemorative dates, the trauma of war in Abkhazia is expressed and transmitted through monuments and memorials. A glance at an online map reveals the sheer number of memory sites dedicated to those who died in the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Among the most prominent is the Memorial of Fame in Sokhumi, which consolidates key dates and commemorates significant figures, weaving them into a unified narrative of the conflict. Each year, on September 27, Abkhaz politicians and civilians gather at the memorial to honor the fallen with flowers and candles. As the day comes to a close, fireworks light up the sky in celebration of the victory. Since 2015, Abkhazia has also held the *Immortal Regiment* march, dedicated to Victory and Independence Day on September 30 (Sharia 2019). Echoing the public sentiments, *Ekho Kavkaza* journalist Yelena Zavodskaya captures the emotional resonance of the day: “On September 30, throughout Abkhazia, families raise glasses and break bread in remembrance of the fallen. Songs of sorrow and triumph fill the air, as collective memory lives on in the hearts of the people” (Zavodskaya 2016). This extensive process of memorialization underscores how the Georgian-Abkhaz war has become a

cornerstone of national identity, shaping contemporary understandings of what it means to be Abkhaz.

Drawing Analogies between the Chosen Traumas

The connection between the Russian-Caucasian War and the Georgian-Abkhaz War as historical analogies began to emerge shortly after the onset of the armed clashes in Abkhazia in the post-Soviet era. *The Declaration of the People's Party of Abkhazia*, by the initiative of Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, adopted on March 20, 1992, informed international organizations that “throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Abkhazia and its people became victims of imperial expansion, subjected to coercive politics and territorial encroachment” (Amkuab 1992, 56). In this context, Georgia and Russia were both named as the colonial powers.

The Abkhaz media also played a role in shaping Georgia's image as an empire, drawing parallels between the Georgian-Abkhaz war and the earlier Russian-Caucasian war. One of the examples is a 1992 letter from a young mother to a Caucasian soldier named Shamil published in the Abkhaz newspaper: “I named my son Shamil. I want him to grow up as brave, true to his word, and fearless like you, Shamil!” (Amkuab 1992, 62). The editorial note further emphasized that the first Shamil fought in the Russian-Caucasian War, while the second fought in the Georgian-Abkhaz War (Amkuab 1992). The purpose of these texts was to strengthen the perception of Georgia as an imperial power by using symbolic language and drawing an analogy between the chosen traumas.

The new nation-building project and the mobilization of diaspora communities through historical analogies became particularly important for Abkhazia after 2001, when NATO exercises began in Georgia. Abkhaz politicians feared that Georgia might use Western support to regain control over Abkhazia. In response to this perceived threat, Ardzinba proposed an association agreement with Russia in 2002, which would allow Russian intervention in Abkhazia's internal and foreign affairs, in coordination with Abkhaz state institutions, to protect Abkhazia's sovereignty and security. However, he did not receive an official response from Russian authorities during his tenure (Ardzinba 2011). The official agreement between Russia and Abkhazia was eventually signed in 2008, following Dmitry Medvedev's recognition of Abkhazia's sovereignty. In terms of content, this agreement closely resembled the association proposal that Ardzinba had made to the Russian Federation in 2002 (*Dogovor o druzhbe, sotrudnichestve i vzaimnoy pomoshchi mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiey i Respublikoy Abkhaziya* 2008).

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This treaty did not alter Abkhaz narratives surrounding the trauma of the Russian-Caucasian War and the Muhajirstvo, and Sergei Bagapsh’s administration continued the message of Ardzinba. This is evident by the opening of the memorial dedicated to the victims of the Caucasus War in 2010, which coincided with September 27. Journalist Semyon Pegov from the independent Abkhaz online platform *Ekho Kavkaza* interpreted the message of the Abkhaz elite with the following statement: “The opening of the monument carries significant political importance. The issue of emigration played a crucial role in the revival of Abkhaz national consciousness and had a major influence on the political events of the 1980s, which ultimately culminated in the declaration of Abkhazia’s independence” (Pegov 2010).

Sculptor Gennady Lakoba, the author of the monument dedicated to the victims of the Russian-Caucasian war, also interpreted the message embedded in the memorial during the opening ceremony. When asked by journalists who the monument was intended for - whether it was meant for the descendants of emigrants wishing to return to Abkhazia or for future generations? - Lakoba replied: “This monument is, of course, for them [the descendants of the Muhajirs] as well, but above all, it must withstand the test of time and remind us not to lose our resolve. Perhaps more challenging times lie ahead. In my view, history is a living organism; it cannot be frozen or permanently fixed in communism. We once thought that way. Everything leads to something significant, to an eventual end. But we must always endure, and we must never lose hope, no matter how harsh the waves that crash upon us” (Grigoryan 2010).

In 2017, a subtle symbolic connection between the two wars was evoked during a public chalk-drawing event held on September 27 at the Muhajir Embankment. Schoolchildren participated by creating colorful illustrations around the themes of war and peace (Ekho Kavkaza, 2017). The event’s symbolic layers: participation of children as embodiments of the future, the Muhajir Embankment linked to exile, and the date commemorating the liberation of Sokhumi from Georgian forces, collectively conveyed a deeper message that remembering the pivotal moments in which the Abkhaz heroically won or suffered heroic defeat are important for shaping the future.

This narrative is strongly embedded in state-approved history textbooks. Central to the analogy between the two Wars is the analogy of Russia and Georgia as imperial forces. References to the Abkhaz uprisings against the Russian Empire and further exile, as well as Shamil’s movement in the Caucasus, are scattered across multiple sections rather than treated cohesively. The term “Russian-Caucasian War” is not mentioned at all, and instead, the

term “Caucasian War” appears only once, without further elaboration. The Abkhaz attributed responsibility for the tragedy of the *muhajirstvo* to Russia. The 2007 manual expressed this view in an evocative phrase: “This [the way of life they used to] continued until the double-headed eagle of Tsarist Russia loomed on the horizon. Abkhazia, due to its disobedience, was awaiting new tragic upheavals associated with *Muhajirstvo* - the forced deportation of the majority of the Abkhaz people from their homeland” (Lakoba & Bgazhba 2007, 180). However, following Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and the ensuing debates between Abkhaz intellectuals and Russian officials over the 2007 textbook’s portrayal of anti-Russian narratives (Epadze 2022), this passage was subtly revised in the 2015 edition. Specifically, the symbolic reference to the ‘double-headed eagle of Tsarist Russia’ was removed (Lakoba & Bgazhba 2015, 210).

In contrast, Georgia is consistently framed as an imperial power, and Abkhazia’s incorporation into Georgian jurisdiction in 1918 and 1991 is described as an occupation. Opposition to Georgia forms a central motif, and the Georgian-Abkhaz War is presented as the culmination of a centuries-long aspiration for independence. Though historians acknowledge that this goal came at a great cost: “*The victory was not easy. About three thousand fighters and commanders of the Abkhaz armed forces laid down their heads on its altar*” (Lakoba & Bgazhba 2007, 359). These themes remain unchanged in the 2015 history textbook (Lakoba & Bgazhba 2015, 400), reinforcing the argument that a historical analogy between the traumas of the Russian-Caucasian and the Georgian-Abkhaz Wars is indeed drawn - albeit implicitly. Despite Russia’s colonial legacy, it is now portrayed as Abkhazia’s key protector and guarantor of its *de facto* independence. As a result, any direct criticism of Russia in public discourse is conveyed through symbolic or indirect means. In this respect, the narrative found in history textbooks aligns closely with that of Abkhaz online media.

Mobilization of Diaspora

Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba initiated efforts to mobilize diaspora communities prior to the Georgian-Abkhaz war. A similar strategy had been employed by the pro-Turkish Abkhaz elite as early as 1918, in response to Georgia’s attempts to incorporate Abkhazia. However, the mobilization of the *Muhajirs* at that time proved unsuccessful, as Georgian forces maintained control over the region’s autonomy until the Soviet occupation (Lakoba 2004). The diaspora in 1918 had a direct memory of exile, while by 1992, Ardzinba faced the challenge of uniting their descendants, requiring the construction of

bridges of memory to the past and emphasizing the connection between their ancestors’ experiences and the current situation.

Following Ardzinba’s outreach to diaspora communities, a declaration was issued by the *Presidium of the Caucasus Club* in the Republic of Turkey, an organization largely composed of Abkhaz diaspora. In the declaration, addressed to the International community, the Abkhaz stated: “*We unequivocally affirm that all Abkhaz living abroad are prepared to support their historical homeland not only through material and spiritual means, but also by taking up arms to defend Abkhazia’s freedom. We want the entire world to hear this message*” (Achugba & Achugba 2015, 451). In this appeal, the descendants of the Muhajirs evoked the memory of their ancestors’ 19th-century exile and declared that “genocide, forced displacement, and the injustices endured by the people of Abkhazia must never be repeated” (Achugba & Achugba 2015, 452).

On July 18, 1992, the international festival of Abkhaz-Abaza was inaugurated, during which Ardzinba delivered a speech: “We are all facing a very challenging and crucial time together, and I would not be mistaken in saying that our Abkhazia is currently in an especially difficult situation. On one hand, this is due to the historical legacy we have inherited, the events of the recent past, the Muhajirs, and the events of the 1930s, when the very survival of the Abkhaz people was at risk. On the other hand, our struggles are connected to the processes that have unfolded since the collapse of the state to which we all once belonged. On top of everything, Abkhazia is under intense pressure from those who are accustomed to implementing policy from a position of power.” (Avidzba 2012: 368). Ardzinba further expressed his desire to unite the divided Abkhaz nation, noting that he saw the same desire among diaspora groups (Avidzba 2012).

The formation of the International Association of the Abkhaz-Abaza People followed the festival, which, according to Abkhaz scholar Kan Tania, played a crucial role in providing support to the people of Abkhazia during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993 (Tania 2021). The inaugural sessions of the Association were held on October 7-8, 1992, in the village of Lykhni, Abkhazia, during the war. Representatives from the diaspora were invited, along with representatives of the peoples of the Northern Caucasus of the Russian Federation. Tania argues that the establishment of the association demonstrated that “Despite being separated by the tragic historical events of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Abkhaz-Abaza people remained united, especially during the most challenging moments of the modern history of their ancestral homeland, Abkhazia” (Tania 2021: 64).

Several sources discuss the mobilization and involvement of diaspora communities during the Georgian-Abkhaz war, including the Instagram page *Insta_Abkhazia*. On February 20, 2025, in response to the delay in diaspora participation in the 2025 Abkhaz elections, the page posted an old photo. According to this source, the soldiers in the photo were descendants of Abkhaz Muhajirs depicted during the 1992-93 war. It further noted: “Abkhaz from Turkey and Syria, along with volunteers from the republics of the North Caucasus and southern Russia, came to Abkhazia’s aid during this period. According to the Ministry of Defense of Abkhazia, the total number of volunteers who supported the Abkhaz side reached up to 2,000 people [...] Additionally, the diaspora provided crucial financial and humanitarian support, assisting with the supply of medicines, food, and uniforms. The Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey played a vital role in the war, demonstrating a strong connection to their historical homeland, despite more than a century of separation after the *Muhajirstvo* of the 19th Century” (Insta Abkhazia 2025).

The International Association of Abkhaz-Abaza continued to operate after the war. In 2018, it changed its name to the International Congress of Abkhaz-Abaza. This organization serves as a key mediator between the Abkhaz elite and diaspora communities in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and Russia. At the end of the 2010s, it had also established connections with the Abkhaz diaspora in England, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, facilitating meetings between Abkhaz officials and diaspora groups in Europe (Zavodskaya 2019).

The Congress functions online through the World Abaza Congress webpage. The site serves as a central platform highlighting both completed and ongoing projects, profiles of prominent figures, records of dispossession, ethnographic materials, and interviews with Abkhaz intellectuals. Available in six languages, including English and Russian, the website actively connects with diaspora communities by sharing their personal stories and family photographs (World Abaza Congress, 2025).

Additionally, the organization maintains a physical presence. The organization continues to support the program established at its first meeting, which asserts that the “preservation of the Abkhaz-Abaza ethnic group can only be achieved through the return of diaspora members to their historical homeland” (Tania 2021, 64). The members of the congress have set ambitious goals: to unite Abkhaz, regardless of their location, and encourage the return and integration of diaspora communities into their ancestral homeland. The organization conducts information campaigns, supports exchange between

diaspora groups, and assists repatriates arriving in Abkhazia with social issues (Tania 2021).

The goals of the Congress align with the national program of the Abkhaz elite. This initiative is viewed not only as a restoration of historical justice but also as a solution to the demographic challenges faced by Abkhazia's small population. The Minister of Repatriation, Aslan Badar, stated during his 2019 speech: “An ideology must be developed in Abkhazia based on the understanding that building a state is impossible without the repatriation of our compatriots” (Shariya 2019).

Since 1993, the Abkhaz have been carrying out the repatriation program with the support of the Congress. Starting in 1998, funds were allocated from the budget to assist in the resettlement of the descendants of the Muhajirs in their homeland. According to Abkhazian media, around 10,000 repatriates returned to Abkhazia between 1993 and 2018. However, some were unable to integrate and chose to leave the de facto state. Descendants of the Muhajirs returning from Turkey often mention that the idealized image of their historical homeland, along with stories and traditions passed down from their parents and strong agitation coming from the diaspora leaders, influenced their decision to return. However, challenges such as social issues, a lack of language skills, and the absence of established connections have posed difficulties for some repatriates, leading them to return to their previous homes when they were unable to overcome these obstacles (Ardzinba 2019). All of this suggests that the consolidation of the descent of Abkhaz Muhajirs and the population of Abkhazia has been successful in terms of memory politics. However, the inability to integrate the national idea into other political areas limits the success of the nation-state building.

Conclusion

This paper examines the strategies employed by Abkhaz political elites to unify the divided Abkhaz nation within the de facto state of Abkhazia. It focuses on the memorialization of two pivotal historical events: the Russian-Caucasian War and the Georgian-Abkhaz War, both of which are deeply embedded in a national narrative of resistance and heroism. These events serve not only as symbols of collective identity but also as tools for mobilizing diaspora communities to reconnect with their historical homeland and nation. The paper also examines the repatriation of the descendants of muhajirs to Abkhazia and the challenges they encounter during this process.

The analysis is grounded in memory studies, with particular emphasis on two key concepts: Vamik Volkan's “chosen trauma” and Eviatar Zerubavel's

“historical analogy.” These theoretical frameworks shed light on how the Abkhaz elite revive and reinterpret historical traumas to serve contemporary political objectives. This study argues that the Russian-Caucasian War and the Georgian-Abkhaz War are central to understanding modern Abkhaz identity. In the ongoing process of imagining, articulating, and interpreting their collective self, they consistently underscore the significance of the 19th-century exile and the existential threats posed by the Georgian-Abkhaz War, linking the two as expressions of resistance to imperial domination by a courageous and heroic Abkhaz people. While Georgia is unambiguously portrayed as an adversary, Russia’s dual role - as both oppressor and protector - complicates overt expressions of resistance, which are instead conveyed through symbolic representations.

Timing also plays a crucial role in understanding how these chosen traumas are used instrumentally during periods of crisis. The Russian-Caucasian War, a defining event for diaspora communities, emerged as a “chosen trauma” for the Abkhaz population in the final years of the Soviet Union. Abkhaz elites invoked this historical memory to foster emotional solidarity among the descendants of muhajirs and mobilize their support during the 1992 Georgian-Abkhaz War. Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba framed the contemporary conflict with Georgia as a continuation of the 19th-century struggle against imperial domination, effectively equating Georgia with the Russian Empire. To disseminate this narrative and gain support, Ardzinba established the International Association of Abkhaz-Abaza in 1992. Through this organization, he mobilized armed support among the diaspora during the war and later used it as a platform to maintain communication with Abkhaz communities abroad.

In the broader pursuit of full independence, the Abkhaz leadership has adopted demographic reconstruction as a central goal, viewing it as essential for building a viable, independent nation-state. The effort to reunite the divided nation became a key component of national ideology and was institutionalized through a state-funded repatriation program. This initiative not only underscored Abkhazia’s separation from Georgia but, over time, also signaled its aspirations to assert greater autonomy from Russia, which has acted as Abkhazia’s primary patron and protector since 2008.

However, while the effort to unite the divided nation is powerful in the realm of memory politics, it faces significant obstacles in other areas of public policy. The association, now known as the *International Abkhaz-Abaza Congress*, continues to operate in different countries, aligning with each Abkhaz president and serving as a key mediator between the diaspora communities

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and the Abkhaz elite. Despite this, the repatriation policy has not achieved its intended outcomes. Practical challenges, such as a lack of proficiency in the native language, disorientation upon returning to the historical homeland, and limited job opportunities for returnees, have led many to leave Abkhazia and return to the regions where their ancestors were resettled in the 19th century. As a result, the Abkhaz national project to increase the demographic presence of the dominant ethnic group and establish a nation-state capable of gaining international recognition and full independence remains more of a future aspiration than a present-day reality.

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