CHAPTER FIVE
LANGUAGE AND MYTHS IN SOVIET ABKHAZIA (1921-1988)

Sokhumi is speaking. Tbilisi time is 5 o’clock in the evening.
Abkhazian Radio Russian-language broadcast, 1981

In this Chapter, the focus of our examination is on the mutual attempts at ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia by Georgians and Abkhazians during the most of the Soviet period in history of the conflict. During this period, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict can be viewed as a nested conflict, and, as we will show, it was language, which enabled – through the construction of ethnocentric myths – the perceived identification of the population that inhabited Abkhazian territory in the distant past with ancestors of Abkhazians (in the case of the Abkhazian myth of ethnogenesis) or Georgians (in the case of the Georgian ethnogenetic myth). Therefore, the description of the content of Georgian and Abkhazian historiographic discourses is central to the narrative of this Chapter. We also point out at an interesting phenomenon of “Abkhazian letters”, a specific product of nested settings of the conflict and an important tool of the status struggle.

5.1. THE EARLY SOVIET YEARS AND THE STATUS STRUGGLE IN ABKHAZIA

The Red Army entered Abkhazia on March 4, 1921. Soon after, in a telegram sent by the Abkhazian Bolsheviks to Moscow, they addressed the issue of the future status of Abkhazia (Gumba, 2003, 9). The answer came in the form of a decision taken by the Caucasian Communist Party Bureau: “1. The existence of an independent Abkhazia is considered to be economically and politically not expedient. 2. To advise comrade Eshba [Abkhazian Bolshevik leader] to submit his final decision concerning whether Abkhazia will join the Georgian federation on the treaty conditions or as an autonomous region of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic” (November 16, 1921 decision of the Caucasian Communist Party Bureau, quoted in Gumba 2003, 10).

However, with the establishment of the Soviet power in Abkhazia and Georgia, two separate Soviet Socialist Republics of Georgia and Abkhazia with equal status were created and have joined in 1922 the Transcaucasian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (Shnirelman 2001, 206; Cook 2001, 28).

It is possible to identify several reasons why the decision of the Caucasian Bureau was not implemented right away in 1921. One is that the Abkhazian newly
established elite successfully managed to show that the Abkhazian ethnic group possessed all the necessary characteristics for a nation, defined by Stalin and discussed in *Chapter Two*. It was argued that after the serfdom was abolished in Abkhazia, the capitalist relations were speedily developing in the area – one of the necessary conditions to be considered as a nation from the Marxist point of view. At the same time, Abkhazians – contrary to many other ethnic groups in the South Caucasus, was able to show that Abkhazians had their distinct language! Abkhazians had textbooks and other literature published in the Abkhazian language well before the establishment of the Soviet power in Sukhumi. As was shown earlier in this chapter, the first script for the Abkhazian language appeared in the 19th century. Therefore, the following comparison of the situation in the 1920s between Abkhazians and neighboring Mingrelians gives us a clue to understand the importance of language for this initial period of acquiring ethno-territorial autonomy under the Bolshevik rule in this particular area of the Caucasus.

As a reminder, it was the policy of the Russian imperial authorities in the Caucasus to limit the possibilities for education in the Georgian language in those areas where the population was considered as not possessing the knowledge of that language. In such cases, Georgian in the Russian colonial administration thought to use the Georgian Orthodox Church in order to spread the knowledge of the Georgian language. In the beginning of 1900s, a “language battle” took place between the Russian and Georgian authorities over the issue of prayers in Mingrelia. In response to the attempts of a Russian administrator to translate the prayers to the Mingrelian language, a Georgian educator wrote: “Mingrelians understand Georgian prayers no less than the Georgians themselves! The Mingrelian language is the Old Georgian language” (cited in Hewitt 1989, 127). However, as we have discussed in *Chapter Four*, the linguists treat Georgian and Mingrelian as separate languages. The following correspondence between the Bolsheviks’ leaders in the 1920s clearly shows that Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders did realize that the level of mutual intelligibility between Georgian and Mingrelian is low but they denied the acceptance of the idea of Mingrelian being a distinct language in order not to award Mingrelia with autonomous status.
In the letter written by Mikoyan to Stalin\(^1\), on 8 June 1923, the Communist leader argued the need to maintain the “internal equilibrium” in Georgia by limiting the number of autonomies in Georgia. In another letter\(^2\), dated by 9 September 1925, Sergo Ordzhonikidze wrote to Stalin that the issue of the Mingrelian autonomy is the hottest issue in Georgia, and the immediate task – from his point of view – is not to allow the use of Mingrelian beyond the Mingrelian peasants’ homes. Thus, rephrasing the title of the famous Stalin’s speech, the “immediate tasks of communism” in Georgia and Transcaucasia “to eliminate nationalist survivals, to cauterize them with red-hot irons… while preserving the independence of Soviet Georgia” (Stalin 1921, 99-100), were seen by the ethnic leadership in Tiflis as not to allow Mingrelians to acquire (symbolically, of course) the major characteristic of a nation under the Soviet settings – the separate Mingrelian language! In response to the proposal of one of the Mingrelian communist leaders to allow the use of Mingrelian as a business language in the rural Soviets and courts of those areas, where peasants did not understand Georgian, Ordzhonikidze asked Stalin to support the prohibition of such a move, because any speculation of a possible Mingrelian autonomy “would oppose all Georgia against us and would destroy Abkhazia”. Obviously, the “destruction of Abkhazia” must be understood as the destruction of the Georgian positions there. Soon, the leaders of the Caucasian Bureau requested Stalin to clarify his position towards the Mingrelian, Ossetian, and Abkhazian ethnic leadership. Stalin’s reply was not delayed. In his letter to Ordzhonikidze dated 17 September 1925, Stalin wrote: “Sorry for my jokes about Mingrelian autonomy being understood seriously by some confiding comrades. You can announce on my behalf that I am … not going to support autonomy for Mingrelia.”\(^3\).

In the same year, 1925, when Stalin gave the right to the “Georgian comrades” to act on his behalf, the Abkhazian status was changed – downgraded – to a “union republic with treaty ties to Georgia”. But it was not until 1931 when the Abkhazian status was again reduced to that of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Georgian SSR. Until that year, Abkhazia enjoyed de-facto quite independent policy\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Published in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 27 June 2001
\(^2\) Published in Nezavisimaya Gazeta 27 June 2001
\(^3\) Published in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 27 June 2001.
\(^4\) Of course, within the limitations applied by the Soviet system
(Gumba 2003, 15). That was possible, partly at least, because of the creation of an appropriate myth of the Abkhazian ethnogenesis by the indigenous intellectuals in Abkhazia, which enabled them to provide a necessary justification for their political leadership’s stand in the status struggle in Abkhazia. As we will see from the subsequent examination in this chapter, the Abkhaz language played a central role in the discourses of Abkhazian historians. It is because – as we discussed in Chapter Three – the Soviet political settings required ethnic group, which leadership aspired for autonomous status, to show the continuous use of their distinct language in the territory in question, i.e. in Abkhazia.

During the period that followed the establishment of the Soviet power in Abkhazia, the in-migration of non-Abkhazian population to the area continued. This was, in part, related to the processes of modernization and industrialization in the republic, which required the use of qualified labor force. In addition, some Abkhazian historians argue that the new Bolsheviks Georgian government followed the same principles of ‘Georgianization” of Abkhazia as the government of independent Georgian republic, namely, to settle ethnic Georgians in the territory in question (Lakoba 1990, 88; Marykhuba 1994, 27). In fact, in 1926 the number of Georgians living in Abkhazia was already greater than the number of ethnic Abkhazians (Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Absolute number</th>
<th>Per cent to the total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abkhazians</td>
<td>55,918</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgians</td>
<td>67,494</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenians</td>
<td>30,048</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>20,456</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>33,570</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>212,033</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 Ethnic Composition of Abkhazia in 1926
(adapted from Lakoba 1990, 42)
In this situation, language quickly became one of the hottest issues in the relationships between Georgian and Abkhazian ethnic leaderships. During the 1st Congress of the Georgian Communist Party, which started on 23 January 1922, i.e. just one month after the ‘treaty on special relations’ between Georgia and Abkhazia was signed, the Georgian communists demanded a privileged position for the Georgian language. To alleviate the tensions, Ordzhonikidze was even forced to make a special declaration: “If Georgians want to make the Georgian language the language to be used in the official domains, then we should allow Armenians and Abkhazian to use their languages as well” (cited in Marykhuba 1994, 412). Nevertheless, the 1925 Constitution of Abkhazia declared Russian language the official language to be used in public and business domains in Abkhazia (Article 4), since the majority of population in Abkhazia did not speak Abkhaz. The Constitution also guaranteed the freely use of all other ‘national’ languages in cultural and political domains in the republic. However, soon after the adoption of the Constitution, the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party required the Abkhazian authorities to use the Georgian language (Marykhuba 1994, 412). Yet, on 13 August 1925, despite of the pressure applied by Tiflis, the Abkhazian regional party committee reinstalled the use of the Russian language as a business language in the area. Then, in September 1925, the Georgian communists insisted on the development of a special decree ‘on the use of languages in Georgia and Abkhazia’ (Marykhuba 1994, 412) Following the intensive debates
between Georgian and Abkhazian authorities, in June 1926, a decision was made by the Executive Committee of the Abkhaz Soviet to implement the policy of the use of three languages in the republic: Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz, which led to a significant replacement of non-Georgian party and Soviet officials by Georgians, ‘in order to facilitate the use of the Georgian language in public domains’ (Marykhuba 1994, 412.) A year later, the 1927 edition of Abkhazian Constitution declared the parallel use of three languages – Georgian, Abkhaz and Russian as business languages in the republic (Marykhuba 1994, 413).

In parallel with the above-described events, in 1921 the Abkhazian authorities started the local program to address the issue of education in Abkhaz language. However, in the majority of schools opened during the period from 1921 to 1927, Abkhaz was not the language of instruction, as can be seen from the following Table 5.2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number of schools</th>
<th>Schools with instruction in Abkhaz</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Number of Abkhazian students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921/22</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10,468</td>
<td>2,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922/23</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11,408</td>
<td>2,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924/25</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14,797</td>
<td>2,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926/27</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19,179</td>
<td>6,073</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, facing the problem of the language shift amongst Abkhazians, the Abkhazian ethnic leaders, nevertheless, were able to attach the enormous political value to the Abkhaz language in its efforts to maintain the Abkhazian autonomous status by making language the core element of Abkhazian ethnogenetic myths.

5.2. THE EARLY ABKHAZIAN AND GEORGIAN MYTHS OF ETHNOGENESIS

The earlier period of the construction of Abkhazian and Georgian myths of ethnogenesis falls within the first stage of the periodization of the process of politicized ethnogenetic
mythology formation in the USSR explained in Chapter Three (see also Table 3.2). One of the first evidences for the commencement of this first stage in Abkhazia is the book written by Simon Basaria, the Abkhazian Communist leader at that time, which was published in 1923 (Basaria 1923). Placing the emphasis on the role of the Abkhazian language in justification of the independent statehood for Abkhazia, Basaria argued that Abkhazians had never experienced the language loss and this is one of the direct evidences of Abkhazia being independent from Georgia since those were the Georgians and not the Abkhazians, who periodically were losing their independence (Basaria 1923, 49-50). Basaria identified his fellow people with the classical Heniochi tribe that settled in Colchis as early as in times of Ramses II⁵ (Basaria 1923, 136-138). The Abkhazian local authorities actively supported this version during the 1920s, and Basaria delivered many public lectures during this time. The Abkhazian Ministry of Education published a special pamphlet propagating the idea that throughout its entire historical development, Abkhazians always maintained their independent status from Georgia (Shnirelman 2001, 221-222; see also Appendix 1).

In 1925 the “Father of the Abkhazian literature” Dmitriy Gulia published first volume of his “History of Abkhazia” (Gulia 1925). Following Marr, Gulia included the Abkhaz language in the Japhetic family of languages and directly connected it to the Urartian cuneiform inscriptions⁶ (Gulia 1925, 36-40). In “History of Abkhazia”, the place names and river names in the territory of Georgia, including its eastern part, were considered to have the Abkhazian linguistic origin (Gulia 1925, 47-52; 62-64). While combining the postulate of the continuous use of the Abkhaz language with the first-settlers principle, Gulia argued that Abkhazians arrived from Egypt and Abyssinia and must be considered descendants of the Colchians. The latter, according to Gulia, are thought to live in the eastern Black Sea region but should not be identified with the Mingrelian-Laz population (Gulia 1925, 89-90). Gulia also argued that Hittites

⁵ The Colchis Kingdom is geographically placed in the territory of modern Abkhazia. However, there are little historical evidences that the Colchis Kingdom ever existed in reality while there are archeological traces of the Heniochi tribe dated as early as the 3rd millennium BC. Ramses II (1304-1237 BC) was one of the most famous ancient Egyptian pharaohs.

⁶ Urartu’ is an Assyrian name of an ancient country of southwest Asia centered in the mountainous region southeast of the Black Sea and southwest of the Caspian Sea, which is known from the early 13th century BC. Urartians were succeeded in the area in the 6th century BC by the Armenians. Oldest Urartian cuneiform inscriptions found are from the end of ninth century BC.
(Abkhazian ancestors) founded Sukhum – one of the earliest cities in the Caucasus⁷ (Gulia 1925, 145-147; see also Appendix 1).

The book created opposing reactions among the Abkhazian and Georgian authorities during the 1920s: Abkhazian authorities approved the idea of the Abkhazians being more “civilized” than the Georgians but disliked the version of the Abkhazians being “newcomers” to the area. For understanding the reasons of a rapid growth of historical awareness among Abkhazians, it is important to note that Gulia, similarly to Basaria, conducted a very active propaganda of his ideas: he made numerous personal presentations to the general public, from schoolteachers to Soviet and Party elites (Gulia 2003, 10). From these lectures, Abkhazians learnt that there were attempts at mass Georgianization of their ancestors in the medieval times. However, Abkhazians were more civilized than Georgians because of the former’s contacts with the classical Greeks and were able to resist the process of Georgianization.

Also in 1925, another Abkhazian intellectual, S.M. Ashkhatsava, argued that the “Old Georgian alphabet” was actually invented by Abkhazians and served both as the Abkhazian spoken and written state language. Moreover, any links between that “Old Georgian alphabet” and contemporary Georgian language were denied and the medieval inscriptions glorifying the “Abkhazian Kings” had been identified as the inscriptions in the Abkhazian language. In addition, Ashkhatsava declared that there are evidences (Abkhazian toponyms in Georgia), which confirmed, from his point of view, that it was the Abkhaz language, which made an impact on the development of the Georgian language and not vice-verse. Therefore, Abkhazians played a major role in the state that arose after the decline of Urartu while Georgians and Armenians played minor roles. The Abkhazian Kingdom incorporated all the Georgian lands and David the Builder and Queen Tamar were Abkhazians⁸. Of course, there must be no surprise that the Abkhazian local authorities actively supported these ideas of Ashkhatsava’s during

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⁷ The Hittites Empire stretched from Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine and dominated Mesopotamia from 1600 BC to 1200 BC.
⁸ The Georgian King David the Builder (1089-1125 AD) made Georgia a powerful state and its economic strength led to a cultural Golden Age in the 12th Century. Georgia’s favorite monarch is David’s granddaughter, Queen Tamar (1184-1213 AD), who managed to significantly extend the area of the Georgian influence in the South Caucasus.
the 1920s. Through public lectures and special pamphlets published by the Abkhazian Ministry of Education, Abkhazians were exposed to the myth of the existence of the Abkhazian “Golden Age” between the 8th and 15th centuries (Shnirelman 2001, 220-221, see also Appendix 1).

Finally, in the 1920s, Marr himself took part in the creation of a favorable ethnogenetic myth for Abkhazians. He argued that the Abkhazian language is related to the North Caucasian family of languages and the presence of numerous Georgian loan words in Abkhazian is the result of only recent cultural processes. Since Abkhazians not only founded their own state but also incorporated Georgians into it, the Georgian language was very much influenced by the Abkhazian language, not the opposite. Marr had declared that Abkhazians arrived in the eastern Black Sea region already in classical times and pushed unrelated Colchians southward. Moreover, in the past Abkhazians occupied much larger territory than in modern days, and were superior to Georgians in socio-economic terms (Shnirelman 2001, 216-217, see also Appendix 1).

As we can see from the above description, despite the fact that the versions of Abkhazian history in the 1920s varied in scientific details, this historiographic production served perfectly the interests of the newly established Abkhazian ethnic leadership. During the early period of the Abkhazian ethnogenetic myths formation, Abkhazian leaders had little restrictions for the dissemination of these versions of history and actively used the instruments of the autonomous structure under their control in order to maintain a high degree of historical awareness among the population in Abkhazia and the formation of the Abkhazian ethnogenetic myth. The versions of history appeared in Abkhazia in the 1920s successfully combined the postulate of the continuous use language and the first-settlers status⁹, and, thus, were in perfect match with the political dogma of the new rulers in Moscow. Loosing to the Georgians by the share in total population in the area as well as by the number of speakers of ‘native language’, the successful steps had been implemented so as to differentiate as much as possible Georgian and Abkhaz and to symbolically force out the Georgian language from Abkhazia, making the history of the territory in question exclusively Abkhazian.

⁹ The version of the distant past offered by Gulia (1925) does not entirely fit into scheme but it was rather an exception.

Following Hroch’s classification of the nationalist movement, discussed in Chapter Three, the period of 1920s in modern Abkhazian history can be related to the Stage B – the period of intensive patriotic agitation, which led to the growth of ethnic awareness among Abkhazians, the formation of Abkhazian ethnogenetic myth, and, consequently, to the empowerment of Abkhazian indigenous elite in the autonomy. However, the strengthening of the positions of the Abkhazians by no means satisfied the Georgian republican leadership. At the same time, the Soviet political settings required Georgians to introduce such version of the distant past that would contain enough efficient contra-arguments to oppose the version advocated by Abkhazians. However, besides the early explanations offered by Dzhavakhishvili (see p. 92), the Georgian historical school followed the ideas expressed in the beginning of the 20th century by A.S. Khakhanov. This famous Georgian historian argued that Georgians were the first-settlers in Abkhazia, but he also admitted that the Abkhazian language is a distinct language (Shnirelman 2001, 228-231).

An unexpected help came not from a Georgian but from a Czech scientist Bedrich Hrozny. He argued that the Hittite language belonged to the Indo-European stock. This opened the way for the Georgian intellectuals to construct the Ibero-Caucasian language family embracing both Kartvelian (to which Georgian language belongs) and North Caucasian languages (to which Abkhaz language belongs) families of languages. Using the approach proposed by Hrozny, Dzhavakhishvili – now on service to the new Bolshevik Georgian authorities – confirmed the existence of the Ibero-Caucasian language family (and, thus, the closeness of the Abkhazian and Georgian languages) through the analysis of a great number of epigraphic sources, tribal names and place names, including both eastern and western parts of the Georgian union republic (Shnirelman 2001, 231-234).

In the past, the Eastern part of modern Georgia was called by the name of a mythical land of Iberia: Armenians and Persians used to call Georgians in this part of the Caucasus “virkas” or “virshbuns”, and the root of two words gave birth to the Caucasian Iveria (or Iberia). The idea of the Ibero-Caucasian language families is built on the assumption of close relations between Kartvelian and most of the other languages spoken in the Caucasus.
In 1931, shortly after the idea of the Iberian-Caucasian family spread over, the Abkhazian status was downgraded to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia. This decision was adopted during the 3rd session of the Abkhazian Central Executive Committee and approved by the 6th Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia. Notwithstanding the declarative style of discussions during such congresses during the Stalinist times, the voices of opposition to this decision were heard (Gumba 2003, 50). There was little room, however, for the ethnic Abkhazian leadership to maneuver: if Abkhazian and Georgian are considered very similar languages belonging to one language family, then the main argument for treating Abkhazians as a really distinct from Georgians ethnic group based on the postulate of the distinctiveness of the language is lost. As we will discuss in the next chapter, even today Georgian intellectuals continue to insist that Abkhazian and Georgian are members of the same, so-called Ibero-Caucasian – language family. The clue to understanding the importance of the issue of the belonging to one or another language family is the fact that a language family unites languages with common origin.

It was the Russian historian Alexander Fadeev, who had been living in Abkhazia for a long time and who attempted to come up with a changed version of the Abkhazian ethnogenesis. In 1934, he argued that there were neither “states” nor “people” in the region but small linguistically unrelated groups with unstable membership in the times of early Colchis, and the Abkhaz and Kartvelian languages existed as distinct languages. Fadeev treated the historical role of the Abkhaz language very high, arguing that the Kartvelization of the joint Abkhazian-Kartvelian state took place in the middle ages. At that time the Kartvelian language of the dominant majority was adopted as the state language used for bureaucratic purposes, in the liturgy, and in literature (Shnirelman 2001, 224). However, even this “mild” version of the Abkhazian past seen separately from the mainstream of the Georgian history was rejected by the Georgian authorities (Shnirelman 2001, 225).

Another wave of Georgianization, or the attempt to implement the policy of ethnic enclosure, can be traced in the period that starts with the adoption of the Soviet
Constitution in 1936. The wave of mass terror in the second part of the 1930s that followed up left no hope for the Abkhazian ethnic leadership to change the situation any time soon. Many Abkhazian intellectuals were physically eliminated. In 1938, the Georgian historian S.N. Dzhananshia published the book called *The Feudal Revolution in Georgia*. Despite of its title, a great deal of the book was dedicated not so much to the problems of feudalism in Georgia as to the denial of the Abkhazian existence as a distinct ethnic group (Shnirelman 2001, 234-237, see also Appendix 1). Dzhananshia argued that there are no different origins for Abkhazians; Abkhazians are members of the same historical ethnic community as Georgians are; the history of Abkhazia is an integral part of the overall history of Georgia. A revised version of the Dzhananshia’s book was published as a chapter of the standard school textbook to be used everywhere in Georgia, including, of course, Abkhazia (Shnirelman 2001, 234-237). The ideas of Dzhananshia had the complete support of the authorities on the Georgian republican and Moscow levels and a series of generous reviews accompanied the textbook publication (Shnirelman 2001, 237).

That is how the new Georgian attempt at ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia had started. It chronologically corresponded to the third stage of the periodization of the process of ethnogenetic myths formation in the Soviet Union (Table 3.2). The new myth of ethnogenesis freed hands of the Georgian ethnic leadership, and the representation of ethnic Abkhazians in autonomous branches of power in Abkhazia was greatly restricted. First of all, from a power perspective, by the mid-1940s ethnic Abkhazians were entirely forced out from the power structures in autonomy (Marykhuba 1994, 34). The replacement of ethnic Abkhazians started in the second part of the 1930s, when the discussion of language issue and appeals to historical justification of the actions of authorities were permanent subjects of public speeches. For example, on 15 August 1937, the *Soviet Abkhazia* newspaper published an article entitled “We should fight the enemies of people without any mercy” authored by Michael Delba. A significant part of the writing is dedicated to the issue of the language of tuition in the schools in the territory of Abkhazia.

The importance of the topic is emphasized by the fact that it is discussed in line with the problem of collectivization. Delba writes, “…Lakoba\textsuperscript{12}, using false arguments, justified an urgent necessity to attach several Mengrelian-Abkhazian villages to the Ochamchira district… One of the most close to Lakoba people, former People’s Commissar of Education of Abkhazia, Zantariya, was forcing Mingrelian children, who did not speak any Abkhaz, to study in the Abkhaz language, denying them the possibility to study in their native Georgian”. At the same time, the first language for the population of this area was the Abkhaz language (Sagariya 1991, 429). According to the author of the newspaper’s article, Zantariya’s measures must be classified as ‘a state treason and gangsterism’. As Delba further generalizes, “expressing an animal hatred towards the Georgian people and the Georgian culture, Zantariya, being a People’s Commissar of Education of Abkhazia during five years, was particularly desperate to disorganize the work of the schools where Georgian was the language of instruction”. Other than ‘favoritism towards the Abkhaz language’, Delba mentions only the achievements of public education in Abkhazia: the rise of the number of schools and the existence of a pedagogical institute (of course, ‘despite the enemies’ actions’).

As can be seen by the further political developments in Abkhazia, such a heavy public critique of the use of the Abkhaz language in schools can be easily explained by the intention of the authorities to prepare a background for the introduction of severe limitations on the use of Abkhaz language in Abkhazia in the near future. Several months later, the Abkhazian Central Executive Committee approved the candidature of the author of the article, Michael Delba, to become the People’s Commissar of Education in Abkhazia (Sagariya 1991, 433), but his name continues to appear on the pages of ‘Soviet Abkhazia’ in the quality of a public prosecutor rather than an educator. In his speeches, revealing the ‘crimes of the enemies of the people’, Delba continues to devote much attention to the distant past of Abkhazia\textsuperscript{13}. It is because the authorities wanted to emphasize that historically Abkhazia was always part to Georgia: the charges of planning a detachment of Abkhazia from Georgia were common in numerous court

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Nestor Lakoba was the leader of Abkhazia in the 1920s and a close friend of Stalin. Lakoba died in December 1936.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} See, e.g., ‘The Speech of the Public Prosecutor Comrade Delba M.K.’ in Sovetskaya abkhazia, No. 253, 3 November 1937.}
cases held in Sukhumi and Gagra in the end of the 1930s. Many of those accused by NKVD\textsuperscript{14} were intellectuals, employed in the area of education and mass media and who made a sound contribution in the developing of Abkhazian versions of history of the distant past. One of the victims was historian Ashkhatkotva. The Troika of the Georgian NKVD accused him in the participation in the Lakoba’s group and planning the detachment of the Abkhazian ASSR from Georgia\textsuperscript{15}.

The Georgian advance in Abkhazia was temporarily stopped by the events of the Second World War, when the area witnessed harsh combats between Soviet and German armies. However, with the front line receding away from Abkhazia, the Georgian attempt at physical ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia regained its force and continued from 1945 to 1953. One of the most important characteristics of this period was the order to replace Abkhaz as language of instruction to Georgian in Abkhazian schools. In addition, the Georgian textbooks replaced textbooks in Russian and Abkhazian (Kuraskua 2003, 54-69). Even before that, in 1938, a Georgian-based script was introduced for the Abkhaz language (Hewitt 1989, 136)\textsuperscript{16}. Following the death of Lakoba, many Abkhazian intellectuals and politicians were repressed (Marykhuba 1994, 32-35; Shnirelman 2001, 208; Coppieters 2002, 91). Also, a large number of non-Abkhazians were moved from western Georgia and Russia into Abkhazia (Sagariya 1990, 52-62). Besides the ban at schools, the use of Abkhaz for radio broadcasting and publishing was also prohibited and in some areas Abkhazians were forcibly resettled (Hewitt, 1989, 139; Shnirelman, 2001, 208; Coppieters, 2002, 92). The overwhelming majority of toponyms in Abkhazia were changed so as to sound “perfectly Georgian”\textsuperscript{17} (Sagariya 1990, 501-507).

\textsuperscript{14} People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs
\textsuperscript{15} On 13 November 1937 he was sentenced to a capital punishment (Sagariya 1990, 483)
\textsuperscript{16} The switch to a Georgian-based script corresponded chronologically to the campaign of changing of previously Latin-based scripts for all the “young written languages of the USSR” but in all cases save for Abkhazian and Ossetian the switch was to the Cyrillic based scripts (Hewitt, 1989, 136).
\textsuperscript{17} Including the name of the capital: Sukhum was to be called Sukhumi from now on. Former Turkish name of the Georgian capital Tiflis was changed to Georgian Tbilisi (\textit{Sovetskaya Abkhazia}, 23 August 1936). The public announcements were allowed only in Russian or Georgian languages (Marykhuba 1994, 157). Abkhaz was also banned from the radio broadcasting (Bebia 2002, 22-23). In addition, the spelling of last names was also changes in some cases to sound “Georgian” (Kuprava 2004, 55)
The choice of the arguments used by Georgian authorities to justify the switch of Abkhaz to Georgian language is indicative of the importance of ethnogenetic myths in Abkhazia. On January 9, 1945, by the proposal of the first secretary of the Abkhazian regional party committee (ARPC) Akakiy Mgeladze and two other party bosses (I. Tuskadze and G. Karchava), the ARPC Bureau created a commission on the reorganization of the Abkhazian schools. The familiar Delba was appointed the chairman\textsuperscript{18}. The commission also included the Abkhazian People’s Commissar of Education S. Sigua, the head of the schools’ section of the regional party committee Sh. Khubutiya, and A. Chochua, the director of the institute for Abkhazian studies. The Commission was given a one month period to prepare the recommendation on how to ‘improve the quality of the educational-ideological work in Abkhazian schools’ (Sagariya 1990, 481).

However, the commission was not able to perform the task assigned before the deadline of February 9, which was a rare happening in the atmosphere of the maintaining of a very strict party discipline during the Stalin’s era. The report to the secretary Mgeladze was presented with more than a month delay due to difficulties in gathering information and preparing the recommendations: Abkhazians were trying to preserve as much as they could with respect to the position of the Abkhazian language in schools in the Abkhazian territory, despite of the fact that only few representative of the Abkhazian intelligentsia were allowed to participate in the discussions (Sagariya 1990, 483-484). This suggestion seems to be reasonable because, as we will see further on, the Commission’s recommendations included some symbolic gestures towards Abkhaz.

Besides being a political document, the Commission’s report provides some useful – and true! – statistics on the situation with the public schooling in Abkhazia in 1945, otherwise unavailable to a researcher. In the beginning of 1945, the Abkhazian ASSR counted with the total of 417 public schools, amongst them 81 were Abkhazian (i.e. in which Abkhaz was used as the language of instruction; Sagariya 1990, 484-485). The schools were attended by the total 51,745 students, and 9,179, or 17.7 per cent,

\textsuperscript{18} At this time, Michael Delba occupied the post of the Chairman of the Presidium of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet (Sagariya 1990, 84).
were ethnic Abkhazians (Sagariya 1990, 485). In Abkhazian secondary schools, the language of instruction from the 1st thru 4th grade was Abkhaz, and from the 5th grade till the graduation (10th grade) – Russian (Sagariya 1990, 485).

Referring to the results of the visits of the Commission’s members to schools and meetings with the general public, the report suggests that the quality of education in those schools, in which the language of instruction is Abkhazian, is much lower than in other schools and explain it by the difficulties experienced by the Abkhazian students when they have to switch from Abkhazian to Russian in the 5th grade, in which they have to repeat the primary school curricula because of the lack of the knowledge of the Russian terminology used in the higher grades (Sagariya 1990, 486) As a result, the Abkhazian graduates of the secondary schools do not have a background necessary for entering the institutions of higher education (see Table 5.3).

The Commission’s recommendation is certain: the instruction in the Abkhaz language in schools should be discontinued. Instead, the language of instruction should be switched to Georgian. The following arguments are used to advocate this recommendation: the knowledge of the Georgian language by a significant part of the Abkhazian population, the lexical similarities between Georgian and Abkhazian languages, and the same corpus of the languages. At the same time (and this is particularly important for the author of this publication) is that the members of the Commission decided to justify their recommendation not only by purely linguistic arguments. On the last page of the report we read the key statement of the Commission:

‘[The switch of the language of instruction from Abkhazian to the Georgian language is justified because] during many centuries, the political, economic and cultural life of Abkhazians and Georgian people had been characterized by a joint struggle for their common independence against the numerous external enemies. From the times immemorial, Abkhazia is an inherent part of Georgia’ (published in Sagariya 1990, 485)
Table 5.3

Ethnic origins of students at the Sukhum State Pedagogical University in 1945


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of studying</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Ethnic origin of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Georgians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above-mentioned symbolic gesture to the Abkhaz language was the Commission’s recommendation to leave the teaching of the Abkhazian language and literature as one of the compulsory subjects in schools (Sagariya 1990, 485). However, this was never fully put in practice by the authorities, since, as we will see further on, many Abkhazian schools were simply closed down and their facilities transferred to the newly created Georgian schools and institutions of professional pedagogical education.

Based on the recommendations of the Commission on the reorganization of the Abkhazian schools, on 12 March 1945, the Bureau of the Abkhazian regional party committee issued a resolution No. 274 on “The measures for the improvement of the quality of education in the schools of the Abkhazian ASSR”, which required the switch of the language of instruction from Abkhazian to Georgian from the 1945/1946 academic year (published in Sagariya 1990, 486). Justifying the change of the language of instruction, the resolution once again emphasized the historical closeness of the Abkhazian and Georgian ethnic groups as an argument for the prohibition of the teaching in the Abkhazian language (Sagariya 1990, 486).

A minute to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist party K. Charkviani written by A. Mgeladze in May 1945 illustrates how the resolution No. 274 was seen to be put into practice by the authorities in the territory of Abkhazia (published in Sagariya 1990, 488). The Abkhazian party leader argues that there are not enough qualified teachers for the implementation of the plan to switch the
language of instruction in the Abkhazian schools from Abkhazian to Georgian, and the Georgian pedagogical training institution in Sukhum alone cannot fulfill the gap. Therefore, as Mgeladze proposes, it is necessary to replace the Abkhazian schools by Georgian pedagogical schools in every big town of Abkhazia, namely in Gagry, Gudauty, Ochamchiri and Gali, instead of the reorganization of the former Abkhazian schools (Sagariya 1990, 488). Because of the urgent need to prepare more Georgian teachers, Mgeladze also suggests to close down the Abkhazian pedagogical institute in Sukhum (Sagariya 1990, 489). All of the Mgeladze’s suggestions had been approved by the Bureau of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia on June 12 (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 142).

It is difficult to find the credible evidences of what was really taking place in the process of the implementation of the resolution No. 274 in Abkhazia since not many related official publications could be found in mass media of this period for understandable reasons. Not much is left in the archives of the Soviet time either. At the same time, there are few other sources of appropriate information. One is only very recently open, formerly highly classified reports, sent to the security services by the informers of the Ministry of the State Security (MGB) of the Georgian SSR (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003). These reports clearly show that the common Abkhazians regarded the ‘re-organization of the Abkhazian schools’ as an attempt by Georgians to assimilate and / or to force out Abkhazians from the territory in question: “The process of georgianization of Abkhazia is very obvious. Everybody talks about this” (Report No 2/1-1227 to the Ministry of State Security, dated 4 October 1945, published in Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 24), “There is georgianization everywhere, people are different now… Nowadays, nobody notices Abkhazians, nobody wants to preserve our culture.” (Report to the Ministry of State Security dated November 11, 1945, published in Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 14).

There are also traces of a silent resistance en situ to the school reforms, when Abkhazian teachers were trying to ignore the directives from Sukhum. The following opinion of a teacher was, perhaps, shared by the majority of Abkhazian teachers at that time: ‘For an Abkhazian, it is becoming very difficult to live in Abkhazia… Now
Georgians will force us out of the republic. This is obvious, because they [Georgians] deny us the right to teach our children in our own language (Report to the Ministry of State Security dated 21 June 1945, published in Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 24).

From the following minute sent by the head of the MGB head-quarters in Sukhum to the party secretary Mgeladze on 2 October 1945, i.e. one month after the first academic year of “re-organization” had started, another form of a silent resistance to the actions implemented by the Georgian political elite was the refusal of Abkhazian parents to send their children to the newly opened Georgian schools, which replaced the Abkhazian schools. The operatives of MGB interrogated the school principals and teachers and found out that parents don’t want their children to study in new Georgian schools and trying to place students to the schools with Russian as the language of instruction (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 145-148). There were also cases, when the principals of schools in the Abkhazian countryside refused to hire Georgian teachers sent by Tbilisi (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 61)

Of course, the security services maintained an especially tied surveillance over the most prominent figures of the political and cultural life of Abkhazians as well. That is because the opinions expressed by such persons as Dmitriy Gulia or Georgy Shakerbaya even in private conversations were quickly becoming known to many other Abkhazians. Without the access to a public tribune, the representatives of the Abkhazia intelligentsia used any opportunity to make their views known to the fellow Abkhazians through friends and relatives, who, in their turn, were spreading a word to their friends and people whom they trusted\(^\text{19}\). Thus, the following report of an MGB informer on the views of Dmitriy Gulia, expressed by the latter in an informal meeting at the then Marr Abkhazian Scientific-Research Institute on December 3, 1945, is very important for the understanding of the Abkhazian point of view on the Georgian arguments of the closeness of Abkhazian and Georgian ethnic groups, at the time of the re-organization of the Abkhazian schools:

> ‘During many centuries, [ethnic groups] have come to the contact with each other.

\(^{19}\) Interview with V. Avidzba in Sukhum, 4 August 2005. This is also confirmed by numerous secret MGB reports (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003)
This contact is the reason why some less developed groups, in order to [enrich] their vocabulary, borrow many words from the groups with higher developed culture. For example, in the Russian language, there are many borrowed words from French, Tatar, etc. But does this mean that Russia and her culture are relative to, say, France? All of you, of course, know the first Abkhaz [script], which I created with K. Machavariani. Till recently, this script did not contain any Georgian letter sign but served perfectly the needs of the Abkhaz language. Due to a political necessity, the [Cyrillic-based] alphabet was replaced by Georgian letter signs. If necessary in the future, it is possible to change the Georgian letter signs by any other, and still, this is not going to be an evidence in the establishing of the relevance of one ethnic group to another.

The history of Georgia can be traced from a very distant past, but the same is true for the Abkhazian history as well. They both have a starting point in the depth of the centuries… Because Abkhazians were less developed, they became adopting many features of the Georgian culture, as Georgia was a neighboring state” (published in Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 26-27).

The above excerpt from the Gulia’s statement can be regarded a perfect summary of the Abkhazian critique of the Georgian arguments in times when the latter were publicly supported by the authorities in Abkhazia in the second part of the 1940s. The officially supported Georgian position was based on the denial of the identification of Abkhaz as a distinct language and led to the rejection of the right of the Abkhazians to be treated a distinct ethnic group. For the Abkhazian intellectuals, the Georgian attempt to link the language issue to the historical arguments in order to provide a background for the Georgian advance over Abkhazia was very clear: at the same meeting, in which Gulia was speaking out his position on the issue of the linking Abkhaz to the Georgian language, one of the leading Abkhazian scholars in the area of historical linguistics, Georgiy Shakarbaya, expressed his concerns in the following way: ‘Abkhazia, with all her historical past and present, has been thrown away from the face of the earth! Therefore, I have decided to terminate my research on the origins of the Abkhaz language [since there is only space for the Georgian history and language]…’ (Lakoba and Anchabadze 2003, 25).

Meeting no publicly expressed objections on the part of the Abkhazian intellecutions, a new version of the distant past of Abkhazia was mobilized by the authorities to support the Georgian-dominated political changes in the autonomy. In this version, Abkhazians was presented as members of the Georgian ethnic group, speaking a dialect of the Georgian language. First, however, some ideas of the past were rehabilitated to support the introduction of a new version of the Abkhazian distant past.
One of such examples is the book written by a professor of the Russian College for Foreign Affairs who visited the area in the 18th century. The author argued that the geographical names on the territory of Abkhazia are mostly of Georgian origin. Obviously, it must be understood that this book proves nothing except its political value for the Georgian ethnic leadership at that time for there is no way to ascertain which was the language spoken 300 years ago in Abkhazia “Abkhaz” or “Georgian”. Many place names in Abkhazia could be treated as Abkhazian but they can be regarded Georgian as well: the Georgian scholars – and the authorities – interpreted the place names as “genuine” Georgian at one time and very much the same names had been interpreted by the Abkhazian historians as “genuine” Abkhazian names at another time. As was written in the comment to the Kerr’s book, “It is very important that, according to the data of the scientist and professor of the Russian College for Foreign Affairs, in the first part of the 18th century, Mingrelia had borders up to Novii Aphon. Although Apsnuis had reached Inguri at the end of the 18th century, they still had a political dependence on Mingrelia and the Imeretian Kingdom. It is very likely that the author refers to the historical border between the two Georgian provinces” (emphasis added, cited in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 27).

The major contribution to the arrangement of the new version of Abkhazian history was made by Georgian scholars in the end of the 1940s. In 1948, the Georgian historical linguist G. Khachapuridze assessed the “Georgian writing system” as the evidence of the Georgians being “gifted” people and of the territorial integrity of the ancient Georgian state (Shnirelman 2001, 241, see also Appendix 1). Furthermore, he argued that Georgians are part to the “Hittite-Iberian group”, historically located on the vast territory from Asia Minor and Northern Mesopotamia up to the Caucasian Mountain ridge. Khachapuridze considered this group to be the founder of the Urartian

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20 G. Kerr, The names of the Georgian provinces, villages and cities in the majority of cases with Georgian and Latin characteristic transcriptions, published in 1732 (the content is described in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 27-28).
21 The comment was published in 1949 in a Georgian republic journal (Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 28)
22 The city is located in close proximity to Sukhum.
23 Abkhazians
24 The name of river on the border between Abkhaazia and Georgia
25 Historical Imeretian Kingdom was a neighboring state of Abkhazia, located in the Western part of Georgia proper.
state, whose population was identified with Georgians. For Khachapuridze, there were no distinct Abkhazian people at all. This work enjoyed the complete support of the republican and central authorities. The pamphlet with the description of the major ideas of the Georgian historian was published in Moscow (Shnirelman 2001, 241).

The Abkhazian intellectuals, who survived the Stalinist terror, were forced to publicly deny their previous ideas of the independent Abkhazian history and separate Abkhazian language. Moreover, the book “About my ‘History of Abkhazia’ was published in Russian, Abkhaz, and Georgian and sent to the numerous addresses of the Soviet and party elites, schools, etc. The most famous Abkhazian historian’s name – Dmitriy Gulia – was printed on the cover but in reality, he was not the author the book. There are evidences that this book was published by an order of the local KGB – under the control of Georgians at that time (Shnirelman 2001, 243). The volume argued that Abkhazia is an “inseparable” part of Georgia (Shnirelman 2001, 240-241, see also Appendix 1). Gulia was able to denounce the falsification by a letter sent to the Institute for Abkhazia language on 20 December 1953, i.e. several months after the Stalin’s death:

“To the Academic Council of the Institute for Abkhaz language:
In 1951, the book under the title “About my ‘History of Abkhazia’” was published in Sokhumi. This book was published in Russian, Abkhaz and Georgian languages. The publication is an attempt to deny the existence of history of Abkhazians as a [distinct] people, and criticizes myself as an author. Surprisingly, the book carries my name!
By this letter, I confirm that I am not the author of this book, which content is entirely falsified… Signed: Dmitriy Gulia, People’s poet of Abkhazia, Ph.D. in History” (translation from the original letter kept at the Gulia Fund of the Gulia Abkhazian Institute for Humanitarian Research)

The book of Pavle Ingoroqva “Giorgi Merchule – a Georgian writer of the 10th century” (Shnirelman 2001, 242-244) became a true apogee of the Georgian ethnocentric historiography. The chapters from the book were published periodically during 1949-1951. In spite of its title, the voluminous book of almost a thousand pages (Shnirelman 2001, 242) was dedicated to the discussion of the ethnic origins of the Georgian ethnic group. Ingoroqva argued that the Apsilae (Abkhazians) are a Georgian

26 The print out of the book was 10,000 copies (Marykhuba 1994, 417)
tribe with a Georgian dialect; there is no doubt that even the Abkhazian place names in Abkhazia are of Georgian origin. Moreover, because of the language continuity, it must be considered as proven that only Georgian tribes lived in Abkhazia to the 8th century AD, although later on they gradually began to call themselves Abkhazians. Support of the book by the Georgian republican authorities was enormous; a series of generous reviews were published in the Georgian media and the main ideas of Ingoroqva were circulated through mass media and officially organized meetings everywhere in Georgia, including, of course, Abkhazia (Marykhuba 1994, 151-152; Shnirelman 2001, 243; Coppieters 2002, 93). The complete book was published in 1954, but the Soviet settings at that time started to shift once again after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the domination of the Georgian ethnogenetic myth in Abkhazia was about to be challenged by Abkhazians.

5.4. ABKHAZIAN ‘REVIVAL’

The shift of paradigm in the policy of Moscow, which is characterized as the fourth stage in the process of ethnogenetic myths construction (see Table 3.2) gave a chance to Abkhazians to try to restore the control over their autonomy they had lost as a result of the policy of ethnic enclosure conducted during the Stalinist era by the Georgian ethnic leadership. They also counted on the Moscow’s desire to replace the ethnic Georgian leadership in Abkhazia (Marykhuba 1990, 122).

Following the change of Moscow’s attitude towards Georgians, the ban on Abkhaz language was lifted and the schools reopened. Very symbolically, the script for Abkhazian was changed once again: in 1954 a Cyrillic-based script replaced the Georgian script adopted for the Abkhazian language in 193827 (Hewitt 1989, 136). Also, the revision of the official version of Abkhazian history started, and Abkhaz restored its status of a distinct language spoken continuously by Abkhazia since the distant past (see Appendix 1). In 1953, a radio broadcast in Abkhaz renewed (Bebia 2002, 32)28. A new

27 And Hewitt wonders why the decision for the switch was made by a “commission” and not by linguistics! (Hewitt, 1989,136)
28 It is interesting to note that when the decision was taken to renew the radio broadcasting in Abkhaz, the authorities experienced difficulties in hiring Abkhaz-speaking staff. Eventually, it was decided that some “minor mistakes” by the program presenters can be accepted (Bebia 2002, 32).
periodical in the Abkhaz language was inaugurated, and another one a year after Nikita Khrushev delivered his speech denouncing the Stalin’s rule (Hewitt 1989, 141). In the same year, 1957, mass protests took place in the city of Sukhum. Abkhazians protested against the references made in the Georgian mass media to the book of Pavle Ingurogva (Marykhuba 1990, 127). Bearing in mind the restrictions of the freedom of speech and organization in the Soviet Union, it would be impossible to organize such demonstration without an approval of the local, i.e. Abkhazian authorities.

Thus, in the Georgian textbook published the following year, 1958, the Georgian intellectuals had to change their positions in the issue of the Abkhazian language. It was no more possible to openly deny the existence of Abkhaz as a distinct language. So, the question of the language of Abkhazians was simply ignored. However, in the Georgian version of the distant past, the Georgian language was used so as to justify the presence of Georgians on the territory of modern Abkhazia. This was the way to build a new version of the distant past by using language as a link between history and modern day claims on the territory in question. The authors of the textbook argued that, historically, there are three distinct groups (Mingrelian-Chan, Kart and Svan) within the Kartvelian family of languages. At the same time, while the population of the early state in the territory of Abkhazia was heterogeneous, its population was gradually assimilated by the Georgians and shifted to speak Georgian, and the Georgian writing system forced out the Greek one in the territory of modern Abkhazia (Shnirelman 2001, 247, see also Appendix 1). Concerning the issue of which language was spoken in the distant past of the area, the textbook showed that the earlier speakers of the three Kartvelian languages were located at the same areas as their descendents today: the Mingrelian in the southeast and eastern Black Sea regions, the Karts to the east of them, and the Svans in the highlands and in the lowlands of western Georgia. The Abkhazian kingdom was called “the true Georgian Kingdom” and its foreign policy was characterized as the Georgian foreign policy. Thus, by means of approving this textbook as a standard textbook for the schools in Georgia, Tbilisi wanted to impose an image of

That is because the most important for Abkhzain authorities was the symbolic meaning of the fact that Abkhazian radio once again is broadcasting in Abkhaz.

Kartli is the central region of Georgia and the seat of its capital, Tbilisi. The mythical hero Kartlos is said to have been the father of the Kartli tribe.
the glorious history of early Georgia upon the public mind as well as to justify the Georgians' rights in Abkhazia.

The attempts at symbolic enclosure of Abkhazia can be clearly seen from the further examination of Georgian textbooks published during this period. The textbook authored by the Academician Dzshavakhishvili was the first Soviet Georgian standard school history textbook, which was approved for the use in Georgian high schools in the second part of the 1940s and published in both Georgian and Russian languages (Istoriya gruzii 1950 for a Russian-language edition). The writing of the textbook took place during the time, when Abkhazian, belonging to a different family of languages, was declared a dialect of the Georgian language and prohibited from being taught at schools in Abkhazia (Sagariya et al. 1991, 484-485). The Georgian textbook’s narrative traces the beginning of history of a unified Georgian nation from a very distant past, declaring the state of Urartu an ancient Georgian state, and characterizes the Abkhazian Kingdom as a “Western-Georgian State”, settling exclusively the representatives of Kartvelian ethnic groups to the disputed territory in the distant past. The authors of the textbook regard the extensive use of the Georgian language in Abkhazia in the past as one of the central evidences of the dominance of the Georgian ethnic roots in the history of Abkhazia (Istoriya gruzii 1950, 152-165).

A new version of the textbook of Georgian history was published in the Georgian language in 1958 and its Russian-language edition was printed a few years later (Shnirelman 2003, 330). The new edition was needed because the policy of Moscow toward Abkhazia had changed and the voices of Abkhazians were now heard by the central authorities. However, another reason was the publication of the first textbook of the Abkhazian history written by Abkhazian indigenous scholars and printed in Abkhazia proper (Ocherki istorii abkhazskoi assr 1960). The authors of the new Georgian history textbook decided not to deny the fact that the population of Abkhazia in the distant past was multiethnic but, instead, argued that the overwhelming majority of non-Georgian ethnic groups ended up being linguistically assimilated by Georgians (Istoriya gruzii 1962, 50-51). This idea remained the mainstream of Georgian textbooks’ narratives throughout the rest of the Soviet era.
Let us take a closer look at the seventh edition of the ‘History of Georgia’, a textbook for grades from 7th through 10th, published in 1973 (Istoriya gruzii 1973, the run of the Russian-language edition was 20 thousand copies). The description of the distant past of Georgia starts with the chapter entitled “Georgian tribes and their neighbors” and the scene is set at the distance of three thousand years in the past. The authors acknowledge the linguistic differences of the ancestors of modern inhabitants of Georgia but link linguistically the majority of ancient population to the modern Georgian language and to the common ‘root’ of a ‘cohesive’ Georgian nation. The mention of Abkhazians in this part of the textbook is made in relation to the description of a group of tribes, the majority of which inhabited neighboring territories and not Georgia proper. Abkhazians are presented as late-comers in the territory in question (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 9). To illustrate the wide spread of the Georgian language in the remote past, authors decided to include a report of the classical Greek historian Xenophon, who had mentioned that the language of one of the Georgian tribes was heard spoken in the Black Sea coastal area as early as in 401 BC (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 13). When authors describe the extent of the political influence of the Kartli Kingdom upon the Western Georgia (i.e. Abkhazia), they also explain to students that the growth of the influence of the Kartli Kingdom resulted in the ‘cultural-ethnic’ unification of the population of Georgia, and this process took part not only in the area of spiritual and material culture but with respect to the language as well (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 27). The visual illustrations to this part of the textbook include almost a page-wide picture of a stone inscription in the Greek and Aramaic languages (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 28), an ancient inscription in the Georgian language (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 30), and a half-page big picture of a table, which shows the development of the Georgian alphabet (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 31). Obviously, the choice of illustrations reflects the desire of the authors to underline the importance of language in linking territory through its historical past to the modern day’s political stance of the Georgian politicians, in particular, as concerns the Georgian claims of Abkhazia. In the latter part of the textbook, we find another picture, which choice seems to be driven by similar considerations. This is a photograph of a bridge over the river Baslati located near the Abkhazian capital Sukhum: the bridge

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30 It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the historical image of the Kartli Kingdom for Georgians.
has an inscription made in the Georgian language in the 12th century (Istoriya gruzii 1973, 65). In general, among quite a small total number of illustrations in the textbook, as much as a third part of all illustrations is related to the issue of the Georgian language in one way or another.

Now, let us take a look at the Abkhazian “counter”-myth. As we have mentioned earlier, the first Abkhazian school history textbook was published in 1960 and represented an attempt to provide Abkhazian schoolchildren with a version of history of Abkhazia appropriate from the point of view of Abkhazian ethnic leadership. Explaining Abkhazian students the ethnogenesis of the Abkhazian ethnic group, the Abkhazian authors managed to combine very old local elements of the legendary Colchis with the cultural heritage of tribes originated in the Asia Minor and argued that the latter mixed with local inhabitants in the territory of Abkhazia and transmitted them their higher culture and language. All this, according to the textbook’s narrative, took place as early as in the 2nd millennium BC (Ocherki istorii abkhazskoi assr 1960, 12-19 and 34-35). Thus, in the textbook’s narrative, Georgians (and other member of the Kartvelian group) were forced out of the territory in question. The distant past was left to the Abkhazian ancestors alone. Interesting enough, however, the following chapters, dealing with the more recent past of Abkhazia, in particular, with the history of the Abkhazian Kingdom, followed the line expressed in the Georgian textbooks: some part of the textbook were written by a Georgian scholar (Ocherki istorii abkhazskoi assr 1960, 48-63 and 68-71).

The next Soviet-time edition of the textbook on Abkhazian history reflected this ambivalence but the major objective was achieved: ancestors of Abkhazians have been declared the first settlers in Abkhazia, which was confirmed by the postulate of the continuous use of the Abkhazian language (Istoriya abkhazii 1986). Moreover, whereas the publishing of the textbook on the issue of Abkhazian history (to be used at schools of Soviet Abkhazia) was always the subject of a very strict control by Tbilisi, Abkhazian teachers en situ were able to provide their students with additional information and interpretations, which differed from the Georgian version of the regional history.  

31 Interviews with Prof. George Hewitt in London on April 20, 2005, and with Prof. Vasilii Avidzba
In addition to the revision of textbooks, the change of the official versions of Abkhazian history was reflected in media publications in Georgia and Abkhazia. For Abkhazian and Georgian historians, one way to support the “historical” right of the Georgian presence in Abkhazia were the interpretations of the ancient inscriptions found in the territory of Abkhazia. A typical example of the signs collected is the following inscription found in a monastery in the Gal region of Abkhazia: “Mother Mary, be kind to solicit under your Son for the Abkhazian King Bagrit and his mother, Queen Guranduht”. The inscription is dated by 999 AD. According to the Georgian historians, Bagrit III (970-1014 A.D.) was the first tsar of the united Georgia, and his mother was the daughter of the Abkhazian tsar George II (922-957 AD). Therefore, according to the Georgian version of the Abkhazian distant past, this inscription confirms that as early as in 999 AD Abkhazia was already under the Georgian rule. Being formally very “scientific” discoveries, the news about new inscriptions or about new interpretations of previously collected artifacts were highly publicized through mass media. For example, in 1967, the regional Abkhazian newspaper “The Soviet Abkhazia” published an article about the discovery made by the Georgian historical linguist Shervashidze in a small village in Abkhazia, which, as explained by the author of the article, A. Avidzba, confirms the fact that the church was built by the Georgian tsar George III in the period between 1156-1778 AD. Thus, Georgians had been ruling Abkhazia as early as at that time. The importance given to this definitely not epochal finding can be understood very clearly if we remember that shortly before the publication of the article in Sovetskaya Abkhazia another “discovery” was made, which had a long-lasting effect on the Abkhazian myth of ethnogenesis. This other event was the attempt by the Russian historical linguist G.F. Turchaninov to interpret the inscription in an unknown language as a sign made in the Abkhazian language.

The story of Turchaninov’s “discovery” starts in 1960, when a peasant, who worked at his garden near the city of Maikop, found a stone with signs that looked

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32 Gal is the area in the South of Abkhazia bordering Georgia
33 Sovetskaya Abkhazia, 7 October 1967
34 Maikop is the capital of the Russian Autonomous Republic of Adygheya, which borders Abkhazia
like an inscription. This stone had all the chances to be simply thrown away but the peasant – accidentally – showed his finding to a schoolteacher. The teacher, in turn, sent the inscription to the Leningrad Institute of Archaeology. There was no one at the institute who could decipher the sign – it was made in an unknown language (if in a language at all!). Then, Turchaninov decided to study the artifact. In 1963, the scientist from Leningrad declared that he had solved the puzzle of the inscription:

“The signs on the Maikop stone looked similar to the pseudo-hieroglyphic Phoenician writing. Yet, Maikop is located very far from Phoenicia. Therefore, it was necessary first of all to identify the age of the inscription. I have established that the sign was made between 12th and 13th centuries B.C… I had denied the possibility the sign was made in the ancient Circassian language because the Circassians came to the area later than 12th or 13th century B.C. Therefore, the only option which was left open was to try to read the inscription in the language of the neighboring people - the Abkhazians” (cited in Khoshtaria-Brosse, 1996, 12).

And Turchaninov did manage to read the sign in the “ancient Abkhaz language”! We will skip here the description of the methodology which Turchaninov used to decipher the inscription, but the conclusion of his work is an important contribution to the strengthening of the links between the major components of the Abkhazian ethnogenetic myth. In the annotation to his book, Turcchaninov wrote:

“In the book, the inscriptions have been deciphered and analyzed, which establish the existence in the Caucasus of the previously unknown civilization and the creation by this civilization of the syllabic way of writing belonging to the ancestors of the Abkhazians, Abazins, and Ubykhs, who called themselves “Asshuis” and their country “Ashuiya”. In the 3rd millennium B.C., this country extended from Black Sea in the South till modern Maikop in the North and transcended the river Kuban in the Northwest and Phasis (Rioni) in the Southeast. The literary monuments of the Ashui language are dated by the period between the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. and 4th-5th centuries A.D. (cited in Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 13).

Furthermore, here is another far-reaching conclusion: “Thus, it turned out that the syllabic writing has the Abkhazian origin. But since this particular type of syllabic writing gave rise to the Phoenician writing, which, in turn, laid the foundation of all the

from the North of the Caucasian Mountain range (See Map 2)
European writing system. Then it is necessary to conclude that not the Phoenicians but the Ashuis (i.e. the ancient Abkhazian slaves in Phoenicia) caused the appearance of the Phoenician writing system at the first place. That is how the Turchaninov’s discovery opposed the Abkhazian myth of ethnogenesis to that supported by the Georgian ethnic leadership, and the Abkhazian language to the Georgian language. Turchaninov’s tale was highly criticized as unscientific by the leading historians, linguists, and archaeologists on the all-Soviet level, especially in the tribune of the major magazine in the discipline “Voprosy Istorii” (Khoshtaria-Brosse 1996, 17; Shnirelman 2001, 270). However, the idea of the great past already penetrated deep into the minds of the wide masses of the Abkhazian population, and, of course, was readily used by the Abkhazian indigenous intellectuals in appropriate versions of history (Shnirelman 2001, 283, see also description of the work of Ye. S. Shkryl in Appendix 1) thus contributing to the strengthening of the Abkhazian ethnogenetic myth.

In response to this “discovery”, a new book of a Georgian historian was published. Georgy A. Melikishvili used the local names and some linguistic arguments to show that Mingrelians and Svans were the dominant population in the area around the contemporary Sukhum (Shnirelman 2001, 247-254). Another book with similar ideas was published by Kh.S. Bgazhba, who argued that Abkhazian was greatly affected by Georgian (Shnirelman 2001, 209). Thus, the idea that Georgians are the first settlers in the territory of modern Abkhazia was propagated again and led to the new Georgian attempt to reject the Abkhazian version of the distant past and ethnically enclose Abkhazia.

5.5. THE PHENOMENON OF ABKHAZIAN LETTERS

The period in recent Abkhazian history from the second part of the 1950s to the end of the 1980s can be characterized by the appearance of cycles in the changes of the official version of the distant past of Abkhazia, the process which made a significant impact on the changing of Abkhazian and Georgian myths of ethnogenesis and contributed to the

35 As we will discuss later in Chapter Six, this conclusion will be extensively exploited by the Abkhazian ethnic leadership some twenty five years after the day of the Turchaninov’s “enlightening.”
persistence of the hostilities between two ethnic groups. In order to examine one of the very interesting features of this process, we have to turn to another important source, namely to letters, which were sent by the Abkhazians to Moscow. The examination of the phenomenon of the so-called ‘Abkhazian letters’ serves as an important instrument for a better understanding of the development of the inter-ethnic relations in Abkhazia as well as in finding out wie es wirklich war, if to borrow the famous expression of Leopold von Ranke. More importantly, however, although the existence of Abkhazian letters was known to scholars since the end of the 1980s (see, e.g., Sagariya 1990, 556-564; Marykhuba 1994, 87-89, 159-163), the letters were not a subject of examination as regards their role in the process of formation, maintenance, and distribution of Abkhazian myth of ethnogenesis and the role of language in the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic rivalry.

The Abkhazian letters is a specific product of a nested conflict in Abkhazia, caused by the ethnic inequality embedded in the system of administrative-territorial division of the Soviet Union, which is characterized by the hierarchy of ethnic groups, and, the system of subordination of autonomous party and executive branches of power. This system of subordination worked in such a way that for the most of the Soviet period Abkhazian local authorities were not able to address the issues of their concern directly to Moscow and had to deal with the Georgian Republican Party committee and republican ministries. On the other hand, as early as in 1932, the Central Party Committee in Moscow established a special department to work with the correspondence sent from situ (Kazakevich and Kaliteevskaya 1986, 12). Soon after, similar departments had been organized in regional and local party committees. The volume of letters sent to Moscow increased after the end of the Stalin’s epoch and reached its peak in the second part of the 1980s. The “[l]ist of requests constantly repeated in the letters addressing the issues of inter-ethnic relations and received by CC CPSU”36 mentioned dozens of letters sent from the autonomous republics and autonomous districts requesting the change of the status of the republics. Needless to say, none of the above-mentioned letters is sent by titular ethnic groups of union republics. At the same time, it is also clear that Moscow’s authorities did use this

36 Izvestiya Ts.K. KPSS, 1989(9), 198-200
correspondence in their relations with the republican authorities and brought in the play
the argumentation and information from the correspondence received directly from
autonomous republics.

Abkhazian intellectuals started sending letters to Moscow in the second part of
the 1940s, when in 1947 historians and philologists, D. Dzidzaria, B. Shinkuba and K.
Shakryl, employed by the then Marr Institute of Abkhazian history, literature and
language, sent a letter to the secretary of the CC CPSU A. Kuznetsov, protesting against
Georgianization of Abkhazia and pointing out the facts of discrimination of ethnic
Abkhazians in the republic (Sagariya 1990, 531-536). However, this letter was
redirected by Moscow to party authorities in Tbilisi and the authors of the letter were
severely criticized (Marykhuba 1990, 87-89). While Abkhazian intellectuals sent several
other letters soon after the first 1947 letter, our particular interest goes to the period after
the Stalin’s death when the Abkhazian letters turned to be a quite effective tool in the
struggle for the maintenance / upgrade of the status of Abkhazian autonomy and
generated a mass resonance in Abkhazia.

It is possible to identify several common features of the Abkhazian letters.
Firstly, all of the letters start with appeals to the principles of the Soviet ethnic politics,
which – according to Abkhazians – had been distorted by the Georgian authorities.
Secondly, the authors of the letter placed focus on the use of historical arguments,
namely the first-settlers principle and the continuous use of Abkhaz language. Thirdly,
the letters contain detailed description of the Georgian versions of history of Abkhazia
and provide contra-arguments of Abkhazian historians. Last but not least, these letters
were subject of discussion in many formal and informal meetings throughout Abkhazia,
often even before the letter was sent, and Moscow’s authorities were forced to react. In
many cases, the letter led to turmoil in Abkhazia and Moscow and Tbilisi had to make
some concessions to Abkhazians in order to heal the tensions. In total, there were more
than 60 letters sent to Moscow from Abkhazia, which addressed the issue concerned
with the autonomous status, history of Abkhazia and Abkhaz language (see Appendix 2
for the list and description of the most important letters).
Abkhazian letters were usually given names according to the number of people who signed the letter. Thus, the letter sent in 1967 after a meeting in Sukhum (7-11 April 1967) and addressed Brezhnev, Kosygin and every member of Politburo and all Union Supreme Soviet, became known as ‘Letter of Eight’. The authors of the ‘Letter of Eight’ raised their concerns over the continuation of the falsification of Abkhazian history by Georgian historians, in particular, the denial of the first-settlers status of Abkhazians and their distinctiveness as an ethnic group, toponyms in Abkhazia, and the status of the Abkhaz language (Marykhuba 1994, 159-163). On behalf of the participants of the meeting, the letter also demanded to upgrade the status of Abkhazia in the Soviet Union in order to avoid the risk of ‘Georgianization’ of Abkhazia. The authors of the letter delivered the document personally to Moscow, where they met a secretary of the Central party committee V. Vasil’ev, who was in charge of the ethnic issues in South Caucasian republics (Marykhuba 1994, 159). The letter brought some fruits to Abkhazians: Moscow instructed Tbilisi to ‘ease the pressure on Abkhazians’ and some of Georgian local bureaucrats in Abkhazia were dismissed from their posts37. One of the other noticeable developments associated with the ‘Letter of Eight’ was the permission granted in 1971 to familiar Turchaninov to publish his book about the “phenomenal” discovery (Shnirelman 2001, 271). In the same year, a historian in Abkhazia, Yuriy N. Voronov, an ethnic Russian, was able to publish a book arguing that the Abkhaz language is not related to the Georgian language and that Georgians are newcomers to Abkhazia (Shnirelman 2001, 327).

Another example of the importance of the use of letters as a tool in the status struggle in Abkhazia is the 1977 ‘Letter of Hundred and Thirty’. The letter was addressed to Brezhnev, members of Politburo and Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation and discussed the following issues: the continuous falsification of Abkhazian history by Georgian historians, teaching of history of Abkhazia at schools and universities in Abkhazia and Georgia, changes of toponyms and ethnic composition of Abkhazia, the status and domains of use of the Abkhaz language. The authors of the letter demanded the transfer Abkhazia to the Russian Federation. Indicatively, the letter was signed by many common Abkhazians, not only intellectuals and discussed at a

37 Interview with Vasilii Avidzba, 4 August 2005, Sukhum.
number of informal meetings in various towns and villages, including a mass meeting, in which thousands of people participated in the village of Lykhny on 2 April 1978. There was also a number of strikes which could be linked to the ‘Letter of Hundred and Thirty’ (Marykhuba 1994, 298-305). The ‘Letter of Hundred and Thirty’ had a significant impact in Abkhazia. Special sessions of the Georgian Republican and Abkhazian regional party committees were held in Tbilisi and Sukhum and publications on the issues raised in the letter had been arranged in regional newspapers. Meanwhile, the new 1978 Soviet Georgian Constitution was adopted. In the Constitution, the Georgian language was given the status of official language. It is interesting to note that the declaration of Georgian as the official language was not planned in the draft version of the constitution. However, following the protests in Tbilisi, the final version of the Soviet Georgian Constitution incorporated an article that declared Georgian the official language in the republic (Hewitt 1989, 140). Moreover, while contemporary Georgian authors argue that the protests in Tbilisi in 1978 had nothing to do with the Abkhazian issue, it had: during the turmoil the above-mentioned book of Voronov was ritually burnt on the Rustavelli prospect, the central street in Tbilisi (Shnirelman 2001, 291).

In response to the Tbilisi demonstration, a mass meeting took place on 22 May 1978 in Sukhum, which was attended by the secretary of Politburo Igor Kapitonov and the first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Eduard Shevardnadze. Abkhazians demanded the rejection of the official status of Georgian in Abkhazia. This request was denied, but the central and republican authorities were forced to make a number of concessions to Abkhazians. For example, Moscow paved the way to an increased representation of ethnic Abkhazians in the local administration. Ethnic Abkhazians were promised 40 percent of government and judicial posts (Cook 2001, 35) and the Abkhazian University was established (Hewitt 1989, 140, Shnirelman 2001, 210). That was done because “no other republic of the USSR witnessed such mass protest movement, including long-term strikes by workers and clerks” similar to those that took place in Abkhazia (Shnirelman 2001, 210). The authorities also requested the Gulia Institute of Abkhazian Language, Literature and History to examine the issues concerned with the interpretation of the Abkhazian distant past raised by the authors of

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38 The village of Lykhny is of great symbolical importance for Abkhazian – it was the residence of the Abkhazian prince during the time of the Abkhazian principality.
the letter (Marykhuba 1994, 164-186, interviews with George Hewitt on 20 April 2005 and with Vasiliiy Avidzba on 4 August 2005)\textsuperscript{39}. Abkhazians were also given their own TV station, which started its work on 11 November 1978 (Bebia 2002, 174).

However, the clash of Georgian and Abkhazian ethnogenetic myths continued in the years that followed the 1978 turmoil in Abkhazia and Abkhazian intellectuals continued sending of letters to Moscow’s authorities. In 1988, the ‘Letter of Sixty appeared’. This document of the length of 87 pages addressed the famous 19th All-Union Communist Party Conference in July 1988 in Moscow and was signed by a number of prominent Abkhazian intellectuals. Amongst the most important issues discussed in the letter was the examination of the Abkhazian ethnogenesis, and the authors of the letter placed great emphasis on the autochthonous status of Abkhazians in the area. There were also references to the change of the autonomous status of Abkhazia in the Soviet Union, the language politics in Abkhazia, falsification of history of Abkhazia by Georgian historians, toponyms in Abkhazia and changes in ethnic composition of the autonomous republic. Concluding the letter, Abkhazian intellectuals demanded the upgrade of the status of Abkhazia from autonomous republic in Georgia to a separate union republic (Marykhuba 1994, 383-439). The ‘Letter of Sixty’ was written in times of Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost. Therefore, it was possible to publish the outline of the letter’s content in several regional newspapers and discuss the idea expressed in the letter in meetings throughout Abkhazia as well as at a session of the all-Union conference on ethnography and anthropology. As a result of the efforts of ‘Sixty’, Moscow’s authorities sent a commission to Sukhum and Tbilisi. On the other hand, in the end of the 1980s, Moscow already started to loose its influence over the policy conducted by the Tbilisi’s authorities and the Moscow’s recommendation did not produce the effect similar to the outcome of Abkhazian letters sent during the previous decades. The events that led to the violent phase of the Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic rivalry are discussed in the following chapter of this volume. However, before proceeding to the next chapter, it is necessary to briefly outline the important findings in our examination of the role of language in the conflict in Abkhazia during the period that starts with the Russian advance to the area early in the 19th century and continues

\textsuperscript{39} The Institute’s report mentioned that there were at least 32 publications in Georgian mass-media that included Ingoroqva’s thesis in a modified form (Marykhuba 1994, 206-218)
through the most of the 20th century.

To the end of the 1980s, despite of the gradual shift of the majority of Abkhazians to Russian, the Abkhaz language always remained of a great symbolic importance for Abkhazians. The same is true for Georgians although they had never experienced the decline of a number of speakers of Georgian at a scale similar to the Abkhaz language. The core of Abkhazian and Georgian ethnogenetic myths is the combination of the postulate of the continuous use of language ascribed to the ethnic group in question and the first-settlers principle. In addition, frequent changes of official versions of ethnogenesis and constant references to the distant past made by both authorities can be seen as the causes for an extremely high degree of historical awareness among Georgians and Abkhazians.

In the second part of the 20th century, the Soviet political settings created the environment for the appearance of the phenomenon of Abkhazian letters, a specific feature of the process of ethnic competition in Abkhazia during this part of the Soviet period of recent Abkhazian history, which facilitated the achievement of the goals to maintain the autonomous status of Abkhazia and provided opportunities to attempt to upgrade the status in the system of Soviet ethno-territorial division. The clash of Georgian and Abkhazian attempts at ethnic enclosure of Abkhazia, accompanied by the changes of ethnic composition of the area, contributed to the growth of ethnic hostilities among Georgian and Abkhazians, which reached its peak at the time of the weakening of Moscow’s control in the South Caucasus, which will be the theme of our next Chapter.