

THE ISSUE OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ABKHAZIAN AUTONOMOUS SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET GEORGIAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS¹

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Abstract. This paper examines how the establishment of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic is presented in Soviet history textbooks, offering a novel perspective on the matter. The topic is highly relevant, given that both during the Soviet era and at the contemporary stage, the Russian government has consistently attempted to rewrite history, a central component of which is the issue of the "Independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia." To reinforce its position, historical myths regarding this issue are frequently utilized.

In 2019, Russian President V. Putin stated that Abkhazia joined the Russian Empire as an independent state and that "no Georgia existed" at the time. He claimed that the Socialist Republic of Georgia was only formed during Stalin's rule, with Abkhazia becoming a part of it. The Abkhazian claim that their independence was stripped away during the Soviet period is also fueled by history textbooks produced during that era. As this study demonstrates, information on this matter in Soviet-era Georgian history textbooks is incomplete, inaccurate, and scarce; the fragmented data regarding the changes in Abkhazia's status raises additional questions that remain unexplained. This can likely be attributed to the fact that during that period, Abkhazia's autonomous status was considered a settled matter, and no underlying problem was perceived. In post-Soviet Georgia, the issue of Abkhazia's status gained greater urgency due to unfolding historical events, which subsequently reflected on the school history textbooks of the period.

In contrast to the Soviet era, textbooks published in independent Georgia provide substantially more information regarding the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia by the Bolsheviks and the subsequent granting of autonomous republic status to it. These texts emphasize the objectives of the Soviet regime and the consequences of this "administrative experiment."

Keywords: Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; Historical myth; Georgian history textbooks.

Introduction. Under the 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, Abkhazia (the Sukhumi Okrug) was granted autonomous status. The provisions of this autonomy were also defined; however, its implementation was rendered impossible due to the occupation of Georgia and the establishment of the Soviet regime resulting from the February 1921 War.

The Bolshevik regime initiated the territorial fragmentation of Georgia. The creation of the "independent" Soviet Republic of Abkhazia, which was subsequently reintegrated into Georgia, must be viewed

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through this lens. The explanation of this process in Soviet-era history textbooks is presented in a highly dry and superficial manner: a) there is no mention of the fact that Abkhazia was granted autonomy under the constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1921; b) only specific dates are provided, while the underlying reasons for these changes remain unexplained.

Methods. Using the content analysis method, this study examines 5 school history textbooks published during the Soviet period and 6 school history textbooks from the post-Soviet era that address issues of 20th-century Georgian history. The theoretical framework of the paper is further informed by the analysis of scientific literature concerning historical myths, their utilization for specific political purposes, and textbooks as one of the crucial vehicles for shaping collective memory.

Discussion. 1. Historical Myth. Defining the concept of a historical myth is quite complex. In a 2019 study, Bernhard and co-authors address this very issue. They argue that defining the concept of a historical myth is not straightforward, and if an attempt is made, it can only be achieved based on its content and functions. The authors note that while a myth is not inherently propaganda, it can become a victim of propagandistic or ideological instrumentalization and be abused. The specific function of a historical myth is to establish a narrative connection between the present and the past of a given society, emerging from its significance (Bernhard, Grindel, Hinz & Meyer-Hamme, 2019). The same authors draw parallels between political and historical myths, highlighting the differences between them. The boundary between political and historical myths is not rigid. The authors explain that the crucial distinction between political and historical myths lies in their social function. Furthermore, they differentiate historical myths from utopia and ideology. According to them, a myth mobilizes social forces. It differs from ideology in its tendency toward integration (whereas ideology, the authors claim, tends toward the division and multiplication of the existing order); they also discuss the significance of rituals. Political myths and rituals are often closely interconnected. Rituals bring myths to life in the present, while the myth, in turn, grants them legitimacy. Rituals, as social events performed repeatedly apart from daily life, provide the myth with the function of being a generator of meaning in people's everyday lives. The connection that a myth creates within a collective (be it a nation or a specific group of people) and their interpretation of the past is confirmed and reinforced precisely through the continuous repetition of these rituals (Bernhard, Grindel, Hinz, & Meyer-Hamme, 2019).

The connection between historical myth and reality is addressed by Mellenthin and Shapiro (Mellenthin & Shapiro, 2017), who explain that historical myths narrate historical events and revive these processes in memory. It is noteworthy that while accuracy is lost in historical myths, the general picture is preserved. As an example, the authors cite the Trojan War, as well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the Trojan War did indeed take place, but the characters we know from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Achilles, Agamemnon...) likely never existed (Mellenthin & Shapiro, 2017). Ďoubalová and Fica discuss the same topic. In their view, a historical myth consists of numerous historically verified and proven events. Their source is reality, and humans are its most essential part. Myth transforms the past into the present, while removing the historical event from its temporal framework, making it acceptable for all times (Fica & Ďoubalová, 2014).

A brief review of the scientific literature also demonstrates that the concept of a "historical myth" is quite ambiguous, and an unequivocal definition does not exist. A historical myth is a variant of a political myth (Белов, 2018). The specific characteristics of historical myths, as a subtype of political myth, manifest in the following:

- Historical myths concern the past and are constructed on the basis of historical facts;
- At the same time, a historical myth is connected to modernity and influences the perception of current reality through the interpretation of past events;

- In most cases, a historical myth is associated with a specific individual, presenting them either positively or negatively;
- A historical myth legitimizes a certain political order or, conversely, dismantles its legitimacy;
- A historical myth influences how individuals perceive their own identity.

A historical myth is a simplified, often incorrect, yet easily perceptible and convenient picture of the past for the mass consciousness. A historical myth is more attractive and comprehensible to a mass audience than a reliable scientific model of the past.

The primary function of a historical myth is to formulate simple and understandable explanations of historical events. This characteristic of a historical myth determines that it frequently becomes an element of ideological construction, shaping a certain political and cultural identity (Аникин, 2018).

When presenting a version of the past, a historical myth does not rely on verified and real facts that appeal to rational consciousness; rather, it is emotionally saturated and loaded with symbols. A historical myth is not so much knowledge as it is a belief. Therefore, in most cases, attempting to dispel historical myths by deploying scientific arguments does not yield the desired results.

How unreliable is a historical myth, and how incorrect is the picture of the past it presents?

According to one perspective, a historical myth is a simplified, vulgarized construction of past events that can develop spontaneously, without necessarily having a conjunctural character or political subtext (although a historical myth without political subtext is difficult to imagine).

A political myth and its variant—the historical myth—influence social consciousness; they are created precisely for this purpose and serve as instruments of manipulation.

The objective of political or, specifically, historical myths can be to instill fear in society, to fuel hatred toward something, or, conversely, to mobilize support for a certain idea or political force.

In most cases, as previously stated, a historical myth is understood as a falsification of history—a distorted and incorrect depiction of past events.

§ 2. The Significance of Textbooks in Shifting and Shaping Collective Memory

Numerous authors discuss how governments utilize history education as a tool for nation-building or to reinforce a specific discourse within society.

As an essential instrument for the formation of collective memory, the school history textbook plays a major role in shaping the national or cultural identity of young people. Textbooks, depending on the information they contain, can be used to project a state's future development, goals, or political orientation. The information acquired from history textbooks at school significantly determines a young person's attitude not only toward their country's past but also toward current and future events.

Collective memory is a socially shared representation of the past that plays an integral role in maintaining group identity (Roediger & Abel, 2015; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). Collective memory can change over time in accordance with shifting attitudes within society (Roediger & Abel, 2015; Wertsch, 2009).

History textbooks are utilized as political and cultural instruments that reflect the goals and perspectives of a nation-state or a specific group (Blatz & Ross, 2009; Obradović, 2016; Podeh, 2000; Roediger, Zaromb, & Butler, 2009) (see Doi, 2017, p. 4).

According to Bikmen, collective memory reveals how specific social groups interpret history, indicating an obvious connection between collective memory and history (Bikmen, 2013). However, it is noteworthy that Wertsch characterizes collective memory as "subjective" and history as "objective" (Wertsch, 2009; see Doi, 2017, p. 7).

States have their own version of historical narrative that shapes the collective memory of society through "hard" memories, such as monuments, state laws, court decisions, and memorial sites (Gang, 2020).

This official narrative of history is taught both within the formal education system and through state narratives and symbols that are part of the daily lives of society's members (see Öksüzoğlu, 2024, p. 145). Meanwhile, "soft" memories are created and shared in the form of social processes, which include narratives, historical texts, and more.

History education has a significant impact on social discourse and how "soft" memories are perceived (Korostelina, 2008). Since the formal school setting is at the core of shaping a generation and textbooks serve as the primary medium for transferring knowledge, the official narrative shapes this knowledge and is frequently presented selectively (Boon & Gopinathan, 2005; see Öksüzoğlu, 2024, p. 145). It provides information about the collective past and fosters loyalty toward specific social groups. Through textbooks, it is possible to construct or transform official (state-defined) knowledge, as well as national, religious, ethnic, and regional identities (Korostelina, 2008).

In a study published in 2009, the authors emphasize the importance of school history textbooks when examining collective memory. Given that the state has the capacity to somewhat control the curriculum studied in schools and higher education institutions—which can change over the years based on ongoing and contemporary perspectives of history (the result of which, to some extent, is the formation of collective memory)—collective memory can be effectively studied through the analysis of the textbooks used by students during their school years (Roediger, Zaromb, & Butler, 2009), a premise these authors confirmed through specific empirical research. To further support the argument regarding the efficacy of examining textbooks in collective memory research, Ward (2006) maintained that textbooks possess a unique capacity to represent a country's national identity (see Doi, 2017, p. 8).

Recognizing the significance of teaching its own version of history, the Soviet government pursued a corresponding state policy (by creating school textbooks) to advance its own interests.

In Soviet Georgia, history as a school subject was abolished in 1922. As government officials explained, "the study of history would be a significant obstacle for the working masses on the path to building socialism. From the 1920s to the 1940s, generations were raised on Soviet ideological dogmas, for whom Georgia, as a homeland, did not exist" (Vardosanidze, 1998, p. 52).

Later, the policy shifted, and the teaching of history was reinstated. Even during the Soviet Union era, the history of Georgia was taught as a separate subject in both secondary and higher education institutions, running parallel to the "History of the Soviet Union." However, teaching the "appropriate" version of history was deemed one of the crucial instruments for advancing the interests of the Soviet state.

§ 3. The Establishment of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Soviet Georgian History Textbooks

As previously noted, Soviet Georgian history textbooks do not write extensively about the establishment of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Specifically, in the history of Georgia textbook published in 1961 under the editorship of N. Berdzenishvili, a brief entry regarding the research topic is provided within the subsection on the creation of the Transcaucasian Federation, and even then, it serves primarily to negatively portray the Georgian so-called "National-Deviationists" (Berdzenishvili, ed., 1961, p. 349). In the same textbook, Abkhazia's inclusion within Georgia is also emphasized during the discussion of the adoption of the Constitution by the Georgian SSR in 1937 (Berdzenishvili, ed., 1961, p. 379).

It is noteworthy that another history of Georgia textbook published in the same year, authored by Vladimir Guchua and Shota Meskhia, makes no mention whatsoever of the creation of new territorial entities within Soviet Georgia.

Another Soviet-era history of Georgia textbook links the creation of the Abkhazian ASSR to the "resolution of the national question" (Tsikhistavi, Tsertsvadze, & Makharadze, 1968, p. 225). However, it re-

mains unexplained how exactly the Abkhazian ASSR "settled the national question." The textbook says nothing about the "Independent Republic" of Abkhazia established shortly after sovietization, nor does it address the reasons behind its creation.

§. 4. The Establishment of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Post-Soviet Georgian History Textbooks

Given that history is currently taught in schools using textbooks published in 2012 and subsequent years, this paper analyzes textbooks from this specific period, which may contain information regarding the establishment of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the Soviet era, history textbooks published in independent Georgia provide students with more or less comprehensive information regarding the creation of new territorial entities within Georgia. Among other aspects, they discuss the reasons behind their creation, population sizes, etc. In the textbooks of this period, the establishment of new autonomous entities is explained by the Bolsheviks' desire to overcome "ethnic strife formed under the conditions of the bourgeois regime" and to resolve the national question by granting autonomous status to national minorities (Surguladze et al., 2021, pp. 303/304).

The textbooks also note that the artificial intervention of the Soviet government complicated the situation and gave rise to ethnic conflicts between Georgians and Ossetians, and between Georgians and Abkhazians. The Bolsheviks altered their decisions several times: "In 1921, Abkhazia was granted the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic; however, in December of the same year, it was linked to the Socialist Republic of Georgia through a 'special union treaty' (meaning Abkhazia was a part of Georgia with a special status and was formally called a Soviet Socialist Republic). From 1931, Abkhazia was granted the status of an autonomous republic within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia" (Surguladze et al., 2021, p. 304). The reasons for changing Abkhazia's status remain unexplained in contemporary textbooks as well.

The textbook published by a collective of authors in 2012 explains the granting of autonomous republic status to Abkhazia as the "establishment of a uniform administrative-territorial division within the Soviet Union" (Kighuradze et al., 2012, p. 240). It further notes that at the end of the 20th century, Abkhazian separatists utilized this "incomprehensible Bolshevik administrative experiment" of 1921–1931 as "legal proof of the injustice committed against Abkhazia—namely, the downgrading of its status" (Kighuradze et al., 2012, p. 240). The textbook attributes the creation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia to the "Kavburo" (Caucasian Bureau) and the Revolutionary Committee of Georgia, which acted under its directives. It is also mentioned there that a union treaty was signed between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, according to which "the Abkhazian SSR entered the Georgian SSR as a so-called 'treaty republic,' effectively with the rights of an autonomy (which is precisely how the 1924 Constitution of the Soviet Union viewed it)" (Kighuradze et al., 2012, p. 240).

The granting of "independence" to Abkhazia is attributed to a different reason in another textbook published in 2012 (Asatiani et al., 2012, pp. 380/381), where the authors view Lenin's desire to "preserve the empire" as the primary reason for creating the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia, noting that because of this, he promised "independence" to everyone. However, it is further stated there that shortly thereafter, Abkhazia's "independence became an absurdity" (Asatiani et al., 2012, p. 381). In December 1921, a treaty was signed by virtue of which Abkhazia officially became part of Georgia once again. Despite the fact that Abkhazia became one of Georgia's autonomous entities, its name remained unchanged. This clear discrepancy persisted until 1931, when its name was officially changed to the "Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic."

Conclusion. As this study demonstrates, the information regarding the research topic in Soviet-era Georgian history textbooks is incomplete, inaccurate, and scarce; the fragmented data concerning the changes in Abkhazia's status raises additional questions that remain unexplained. This can likely be attributed to the fact that during that period, Abkhazia's autonomous status was considered a settled matter, and no underlying problem was perceived. In post-Soviet Georgia, the issue of Abkhazia's status gained greater urgency due to unfolding historical events, which subsequently reflected on the school history textbooks of the period. In contrast to the Soviet era, textbooks published in independent Georgia provide substantially more information regarding the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia by the Bolsheviks and the subsequent granting of autonomous republic status to it. These texts emphasize the objectives of the Soviet regime and the consequences of this "administrative experiment."

Given that textbooks serve as one of the crucial vehicles for shaping collective memory, and considering that the issue of Abkhazia is particularly relevant in contemporary times, significant attention must be paid to teaching this subject. This is necessary not only for conducting a defined state policy but also for overcoming—through the teaching of objective history—the historical myths currently propagated, including those disseminated by representatives of the Russian government, which fuel the anti-Georgian sentiments of Abkhazian separatists.

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