

# Dealing with the Past in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict

The Power of Narratives, Spaces and Rituals

Andrea Zemskov-Züge

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# 1 Introduction

Brandon Hamber’s essay addresses two important questions: “What is the role of different approaches for dealing with painful memories and violent pasts?” and “How do the different dimensions – interpersonal and intergroup relations, memories, and identities at the individual and collective level – relate to one another?” (Hamber 2015, 2). These questions open up a universe of additional topics related to the cultural context, societal preconditions and obstacles to dealing with the past in post-war societies. I read his remarks against the background of my field of work in the South Caucasus. Here I engage as a historian, having specialised in Soviet and post-Soviet war memory, and as a dialogue practitioner striving to make use of scientific concepts and findings for establishing a sound and resilient peacebuilding system in the region.

Hamber’s text inspired me to critically reflect on my own assumptions and preoccupations, and on the particular circumstances and political situation that frame my work in Georgia and Abkhazia. My comment will be developed in four steps. In the following – second – section I will give a short introduction to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict setting. In the third section I will examine two main differences between Hamber’s and my fields of work. One concerns the setting of peacebuilding work: whether perpetrators and victims have to live in close proximity to each other, or whether they live largely apart or even completely separated from each other. The other difference concerns the roles and repertoires of insiders compared to the potentials of external actors. I will outline some differences in the scope and reach of these actors. In the fourth section I will address several emerging issues that are useful for the practice of dealing with the past regardless of regional specifics and draw conclusions in the fifth and final section of this comment.

## 2 Background: the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict setting

The Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 was a consequence of the disintegration of the Soviet Empire.<sup>1</sup> Previously unofficial and suppressed discourses on “national” and “ethno-political” identity had been emerging in many Soviet republics since 1987, when the former Soviet President Michael Gorbachev opted for more openness, granting freedom of speech and print. In Georgia, a nationalist movement gained power. In 1991, Georgia became an independent state. At the same time the Abkhaz national movement, drawing on experiences of oppression, started to push for more political power and independence in a federative state. As state institutions were weak, this confrontation led to repeated violent clashes, starting in 1989, and to outright war in August 1992. It resulted in ten thousands of war dead on both sides and 8000 wounded (Peterson 2008, 187). According to UNHCR data (UNHCR/EU 2009, 6), about 240,000 Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia during the war, with Russian support. Most of them settled in Georgia as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Abkhazia had proclaimed itself a republic before the outbreak of the war in July 1992, yet it has been acknowledged so far only by Russia (in 2008) and a few smaller states. Up to now (2015) it has been impossible for many IDPs to return. From an Abkhaz perspective, the return of a large number of ethnic Georgians, who had been displaced during the war, is seen as great risk. New occurrence of violence is feared as well as disputes about property, land and housing, the IDPs had to abandon. The Abkhaz population today numbers around 200,000 people (varying according to different

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Auch 2004.

estimates). Many of the remaining Georgian minority are deprived of Abkhaz passports and the right to vote, due to the Abkhaz authorities' fears of shattering the current fragile majority situation. Due to border restrictions, most citizens of Georgia proper are not even allowed to enter Abkhazia today. Georgian perspectives on war history are therefore completely marginalised in Abkhaz public discourses on the war.

Today, the overall impact of the war is much more perceptible in Abkhazia than in Georgia. Nearly every family lost members during the war. The fighting took place on Abkhaz territory. The history of the war is represented as a glorious founding myth. It is remembered frequently in Abkhazia. Victory day is celebrated on September 30th with many festivities. But this vivid memorial culture does not at all reflect the memories of the former Georgian population and their views on the history of the conflict.

In Georgia, with a population of over four million, the war has had much less demographic impact: in comparison to the Abkhaz side only a very small percentage of the population suffered directly from the war. There is no glorious victory narrative to be told. Only a small percentage of the population (mainly the older generation of IDPs) have their own memories of cohabitation with the Abkhaz or of the war. Very few remember the discrimination and injustices against the Abkhaz minority in Soviet times, which are so central to the Abkhaz narrative. Public commemoration of this war plays a comparably minor role in Georgian public discourse. There is, however, a widespread friendship narrative that plays down Abkhaz agency in the war and emphasises instead the Russian role. This discourse again does not include the motives and experiences of the Abkhaz side.

### 3 Separate societies vs integration of both conflict parties

Hamber describes tensions caused by uneven dynamics in the way individuals and societies come to terms with past events. I fully agree: we must accept that victims need to address their experiences and deal with their trauma in a thoroughly individual manner and at their own pace. They cannot be expected to subordinate their individual needs and feelings to a societal or political agenda. This has become obvious in the Caucasus as well. Georgian IDPs strive to return to their houses, whether or not this is deemed acceptable by Abkhaz or even Georgian politicians. People who have lost relatives have a strong wish to find the missing, identify the bodies and take care of the graves of the deceased, no matter how the political situation develops and which territory the gravesites are assigned to. These needs can easily be exploited politically by both sides.

The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia is further escalated by factors that stem from the international framework. Political leaders and large sections of the population align themselves with different political and ideological camps: the Abkhaz to the Russian sphere of influence and the Georgians to the EU and US spheres of influence. A whole range of questions and memories have been “outsourced” from Abkhazia and others were never integrated into Georgian official discourses. In the present state of isolation from each other, none of the sides is forced to question their assumptions and remember those details about the past that do not fit their world views. On the Georgian side, the idea of the “Abkhaz brothers” who have been overrun and blindsided by the Russian enemy is widespread. In this view, Abkhaz are not considered a “real conflict party” at all. On the Abkhaz side, it is easily forgotten that not all Georgians who were evicted or killed were nationalists or even opposed to Abkhaz independence. Competing narratives are fostered, and this in the long run helps to perpetuate the conflict.

I have established above that in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict setting, the conflict parties are largely separated from each other. Only a small Georgian minority with very limited reach is living in Abkhazia

today. In conflict settings where the two sides are separated, an impulse from the outside is often needed in order to integrate the other side's experiences and views. I will refer to an example from the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict setting. In a workshop I conducted in Georgia with young people, war witnesses and veterans, we listened to an interview recounting a woman's experiences concerning Georgian non-state conflict actors, the so-called "Neformaly". These "Neformaly" would wear uniforms and come to South Ossetian homes to confiscate property and control the non-Georgian population, often acting violently and inducing fear in the non-Georgian population during the escalation of conflict in 1989. These actors were described very vividly, along with the fear their appearance provoked in the witness describing them. During the discussion, young Georgian workshop participants started challenging the war witnesses present, demanding more information about these "Neformaly" and their role in the escalation of conflict. This part of history was obviously not part of the usual Georgian discourse. Especially interesting was the argumentation of one war veteran, who claimed that these actors should not be seen as violators, but as dissidents who freed Georgia from Soviet rule. He met with fierce resistance from the young participants, who questioned his positive assessment. An intense and fruitful discussion on the Georgian nationalist movement followed. It had been induced by integrating parts of the "other side's" experiences, experiences rarely talked about in Georgia today.

Another question addressed by Hamber is the resistance of many victims to reconciliation processes. He underlines that some victims felt pressured into forgiving their perpetrators (Hamber 2015, 8) and rejects calls for "closure" (ibid.). It seems obvious to me that in societies where victims and perpetrators live together, or where, as in Rwanda, perpetrators are released from prison and return to their communities, these questions become acute. But even separated neighbouring societies like Georgia and Abkhazia cannot stay apart forever. In a post-war society, different groups often hold different stakes in deciding whether reconciliation processes should be initiated and how far they should be taken. One group might speak in favour of reconciliation and dialogue, while another group might strictly oppose this or, for that matter, demand "closure" and opt for a "new start from a blank slate". I believe that in the context of the Georgian conflict, this demand often seems to express opposition to reconciliation rather than an act of reconciliation. The past has not yet been elaborately discussed between the conflict parties. Therefore, suggesting a "new start" means demanding that certain aspects of the conflict can never be spoken about and, consequently, that their occurrence must never be acknowledged. Such an approach allows perpetrators on both sides to "hide" behind discourses of friendship and harmony. "Silent" defenders of violence can hold on to their opinions, not having to change their points of view. This imposes narrow limits on the development of trusting relations between former enemies and creates constant obstacles in cross-conflict line contact. It is therefore necessary to create spaces in each of the conflict groups where the past can be addressed in a safe environment.

In our work on the violent past of Georgian–Abkhaz relations in the context of Berghof Foundation's Caucasus programme<sup>2</sup> over the past few years, we have learned some general lessons on how resistance can be fruitfully embraced by the dialogue process. These experiences might also, to some extent, prove beneficial in other conflict settings or formats.

One important experience is: when dialogue events are organised and conducted, reservations on any side must be taken seriously and given space. They are usually voiced on both sides by participants of the dialogue events and interest groups that are not directly involved. For example, victims' organisations may announce officially that it is amoral to talk to the former perpetrators, claiming that it violates the victims' dignity. Or: participants of a dialogue event may be afraid of "stirring old wounds" or of listening to the other side at all. Facilitators and organisers must take into account that people have good reasons for not trusting the "other side", for keeping the memory of disappointments and negative experiences alive, and for refusing to address these difficult topics at all. On both sides we heard reservations such as: "We do

<sup>2</sup> For more information on our projects, see: <http://www.berghof-foundation.org/de/programme/kaukasus/geschichte-erinnerung-und-identitaet/>.

not want to talk to ‘them’ at all”; “‘They’ will never change”; and “Why do we have to come back to these old stories? Let’s talk about the future”. These comments are important, and many people on both conflict sides have such feelings. They must therefore be perceived as a necessary and justified phenomenon. Only if they can be articulated will other related questions come to the fore, such as: what do we gain from attitudes of resistance? But also: what do we lose when we strictly adopt them?

One possible answer is that by avoiding direct contact with the other side we gain a feeling of safety and a position of power. On the other hand, we lose opportunities to make our views and perceptions of the conflict scenario heard, and to receive acknowledgement of our suffering. We may also forego the chance to better understand how the other side sees the situation, and we might lose economic or social opportunities. Reservations can be used fruitfully if they are discussed on each side separately, prior to cross-conflict-line dialogue. It is important that these discussions are facilitated in a way that allows reservations to come to the fore.<sup>3</sup> It is only by acknowledging one’s own and the other sides’ right to experience feelings of mistrust and reservations, that participants and related groups can overcome their fears and see the winning side of cross-conflict-line contacts.

Another important experience that stems from our work: people will only be won over to relationship-building initiatives if they feel they can personally benefit from them. It is important that those who want to talk to people from the other side actually have rewarding experiences and can afterwards report positively on these encounters. Even in reluctant groups in society there are always individuals who are curious and want to know more about the thoughts and perspectives of people on the other side. If these open-minded individuals can be persuaded to share their memories, impressions and reservations with their own peer group, more reluctant people may become involved in discussions and create openings for bridge-building across the conflict divide. Processes of reconciliation need to be pluralistic and to integrate critical voices in order to become rooted in society. Reservations are not only acceptable but necessary for building trust in the long run.

## 4 The potential of insiders and outsiders in dealing with the past

While Hamber presumably writes from the perspective of an expert insider, I work as an external expert supporting local people who are willing to address the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. As an external expert I can adopt specific roles and approaches that may be helpful for changing the perspectives of stakeholders. At the same time, addressing issues of the violent past in a setting where people have to deal with painful memories is a difficult and delicate matter.

The first and most important role in dealing with the past must be played by insiders. Much better than any foreigner, an insider can see and understand what Brandon Hamber calls the “distinctive political, social and cultural meanings of violence” (Hamber 2015, 5). Insiders can see the needs and troubles of their peers and find sensible and sensitive ways of approaching them. Hamber’s remarks reminded me of one of our project partners, an Abkhaz woman who had lost her son in the war and founded a mothers’ organisation in the post-war years. She observed that many hundreds of mothers, even more than four years after the war, were still wearing black and covering their heads with mourning scarves. This was and is especially the case in rural regions. The role of the mourning mother completely dominated their lives, and it seemed impossible for them to assume any other role. It was hard for them to find the point in time

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<sup>3</sup> The methods developed and used by the Berghof team will be described in our training manual, forthcoming 2016.

when they could or should return to a more regular life, without the feeling of being a “bad” mother or depriving the fallen son of his right to be honoured and mourned.

In a spontaneous symbolic gesture at a public memorial event, the leader of the mothers’ organisation took off her mourning scarf and the one of another mother who had approached her on the scene. During the following weeks after the event, again and again mothers approached her, asking for their scarves to be taken from their heads. In reaction to these pleas, with time, the organisation developed a ritual in which they would go to mothers’ homes throughout the country and, in honouring their sons, remove their shawls, offering them in replacement a coloured, speckled shawl. In Abkhaz tradition the speckled shawl could be worn for mourning as well as in daily life. By offering each grieving mother a substitute, every one of them was empowered and given the possibility to decide. Did she want to continue to cover her head? Or was it also appropriate for her to wear the speckled shawl on her shoulders, keeping it at the same time as a reminiscence of the deceased? In its symbolic power, the act of removing the scarf is accessible to everybody, independent of their education and background.

This ritual, of course, could only have been developed and conducted by insider facilitators. The organisation’s activists would share with the mother the responsibility of removing the scarf, thus opening a possibility for transforming the feeling of sorrow into a positive remembering of the deceased. In this activity, I see insiders who are pioneers for dealing with the past communicating with reluctant members of their own community who are scared of being criticised by their village communities if they decide to relinquish the symbols of mourning. The approach chosen by the women mentioned above is revolutionary, because it helps free individuals from social restraints and supports them as they take control of their lives. The women are not urged to find closure but empowered to find new ways of integrating mourning into their lives and honouring their deceased. That way they can deal with their loss at their own pace and are not excluded or separated from other women in the same situation, even if they have different patterns of coping.

The intervention described above was undertaken by a group of insiders; it was shaped as a symbolic act and directed at concrete transformations in peoples’ lives. For an outsider, this would be overbearing and risky. First of all, outsiders need to listen and observe in order to understand what happened in the past and what impact it has had on people on both sides of the conflict divide. In listening and observing, outsiders can share their observations and mirror peoples’ statements and behaviour, asking questions and adding outsiders’ perspectives to the insiders’ discussions. In so doing, outsiders also have a certain space for manoeuvre. As an outsider one can say and do “strange” things that would not necessarily be acceptable for insiders, operating to a certain extent outside of local discourses. Outsiders can, for example, choose the instrument of discursive interventions, aiming to challenge conflict-relevant stereotypes. An outsider can challenge a dominant narrative that is sacrosanct to insiders, such as the friendship narrative in Georgia. To a certain extent outsiders can also formulate and defend unpopular “truths”, and they can address events that are not usually remembered publicly. In this case they must be prepared to accept the role of scapegoat for a limited amount of time in order to facilitate and catalyse a discussion. This potential can also be used for “importing” views and memories from the “other side”. In this respect, outsiders can adopt the role of messengers, moving between the different constituencies and enabling a communication that cannot be initiated by insiders directly.

## 5 Conclusion: Narratives, spaces and rituals

Brandon Hamber writes: “Thus, any society grappling with mass injustice should seek to open as much social and psychological space as possible and set down as many clear moral markers as achievable. It is only through doing this that an adequate context can be created in which victims can undertake the difficult intra-psychic work of coming to terms with the injustices they suffered.” (Hamber 2015, 16). In the Georgian–Abkhaz context, a clear marker would be for example the uncompromising renunciation of violence. Until not long ago, the phrase “What’s lost by war can be won by war” was still widespread in Georgia and continued to be supported in the Saakashvili government’s policy. I am convinced that a deep and thorough engagement with Abkhaz war memory on the Georgian side can bring about a sustainable change to this discourse. Sustainable peace can be achieved in the region only if this moral marker is adopted: the clear and sustainable message, sent by policymakers in Georgia, that “reconquering” the territory lost to Abkhazia is not an option, and that it is unacceptable even to verbally ponder military action. In shaping the dominant narrative of the past, policymakers in Georgia must recognise and clearly state that the damage done to the Abkhaz-Georgian relationship by war has been so serious that there can be no “business as usual” in the relationship, and that a denial of past violence or, worse, any threat of future violence, will do permanent harm to future relations.

In my view, suitable narratives and discourses about the violent past are at the centre of finding ways to constructively overcome violent events. It is vital that these discourses be pluralistic, reflecting the perspectives of various groups in society. There cannot be only one thread of memory; a variety of memories must exist and be accessible in each society. They must complement and support each other, even if they contradict each other at times. In my scientific work on narratives in the late Stalinist Soviet Union, I have come to the conclusion that Stalin’s history policy on the “Great Fatherland War” was highly devastating not so much because it depicted a purely militarist perspective in which only the 1944 victories counted, but mainly because it claimed to be the only acceptable history narrative (Zemskov-Züge, 2012b, 286ff).

This leads to the question of how pluralistic interpretations of history can be developed in society. What role can state institutions play in this respect and what can non-state actors contribute? What kind of space is needed to conduct such work? State institutions, of course, even in democracies, have certain directives as to which interpretations of history are accepted and on which ones they base their official policy. However, to shape discourses on the past in a pluralistic way, nurturing controversial discussions, the process should not be left to professional historians in state institutions alone. NGOs, museums, schoolbooks, art and literature all need to engage in the process and add pluralistic meaning, based on historical facts.

Non-state actors are much freer in their interpretation of past events than state institutions. If, for example, a victims’ organisation offers psychological support and group therapy to their members, in which they can recount and share traumatising experiences, a space is created, independent of political correctness and official lines, where narratives can be shaped according to the needs of survivors. A youth organisation that seeks to help post-war generations understand their parents’ experiences can contribute a lot to transgenerational bridge-building. Art projects can help people to cope with painful memories by expressing consequences of violence that are difficult to verbalise. Such organisations and initiatives are always bound to their members’ views and interest. They can contribute to making visible additional perceptions that may complement and challenge the dominant narrative without replacing it. While state institutions are responsible for establishing central moral markers, non-state actors are responsible for adding plurality and diversity.

I will add one final point: I believe that interpretations of history, if they are to become fully integrated and understood in society, should not stay confined to their verbal existence but also manifest themselves in other forms. As shown in my example (see section 4), rituals can hold great significance for witnesses and their families and open up possibilities for transforming war-related identities. History can be presented in a way that corresponds with traditions and in accordance with the specific cultural and societal meanings ascribed to the violent pasts in the particular conflict context. Such rituals are easy to adapt and can be understood regardless of educational background. Since reconciliation is always at risk of provoking fear, traditional and more familiar forms and actions can help to reduce such fears and give the people involved confidence in the positive results of their challenging endeavour. As the example of women changing their scarves has shown, rituals can unite several key functions and leave room for individual choices that integrate mourning and honour the deceased while creating steps towards a transformation of grief. In these cases, the individuals can adjust the ritual to their own realities and feelings.

These three elements – balanced history interpretations with clear moral markers, pluralistic spaces for remembering and discussing the past and suitable rituals of commemoration – are, in my view, crucial for enabling a society to deal with its violent past. For cross-conflict-line encounters, a sound balance between critical self-reflection and positive experiences in direct contact is vital. At the end of the day, only self-reflection can create a safe and fruitful base for reaching out across the conflict divide, be it between groups inside a society or across ceasefire lines or state borders.

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**About the Author**

Dr Andrea Zemskov-Züge is a project officer for the Berghof Foundation Caucasus Programme. A historian, she has worked since 2000 as a trainer, consultant and facilitator in the field of conflict resolution in Georgia, Abkhazia, Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany and Bosnia. Zemskov-Züge also conducts research on Soviet and Eastern European history. In her training, consultancy and research activities, she specialises in the role of memory and history policy in conflict societies and post-war societies, preferably using methods of oral history. In 2012 she published “Zwischen politischen Strukturen und Zeitzugenschaft” on Soviet history policies during and after the Leningrad siege. Zemskov-Züge studied at the Free University of Berlin and the St. Petersburg State University, Russia. She holds a PhD from the University of Konstanz, Germany.