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2 **The curse of displacement: Local narratives of forced expulsion and**
3 **the appropriation of abandoned property in Abkhazia**
4

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8 **Abstract.** Since the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, the often-precarious status of the Georgians
9 displaced from Abkhazia has received significant academic attention. In contrast, the
10 consequences of displacement from the reverse perspective – how it has affected the people who
11 stayed behind – remains underanalysed. Drawing on narratives collected during several months
12 of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper argues that although ethnic Abkhazians see themselves as
13 victims of ethnic violence rather than perpetrators, the re-distribution of Georgian property
14 nevertheless caused significant distress. Many condemned the practice of appropriation,
15 suggesting that taking what is not one’s own is not only a violation of the property of the original
16 owner, but also of the Abkhaz moral code and therefore shameful. To them, the trophy houses
17 were a curse, both literally – as spaces haunted by former occupants – and metaphorically, as a
18 source and reminder of a certain “moral corruption” within Abkhazian society. However, while
19 the stories around the trophy houses reflect substantial intra-communal divisions, I suggest that
20 they are also an expression of a shared post-war experience. Like the horror stories of Georgian
21 violence, and those of Abkhaz heroism, they have become part of an intimate national repertoire
22 constitutive of Abkhazia’s post-war community.
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25 *Keywords:* forced displacement; ethnic cleansing; narratives; victimhood; Abkhazia
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29 **Introduction**
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31 At the end of the 14-month long Georgian-Abkhaz war in September 1993, which
32 resulted in the victory of the pro-Abkhaz forces, around 200,000 ethnic Georgians were
33 displaced and forced to resettle to areas outside of Abkhazia, such as the Samegrelo region in
34 Western Georgia and the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.¹ Understandably, the plight of the refugees
35 or so-called Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the majority of whom have not been able to
36 return, has received much academic attention.² Existing studies have highlighted the displaced
37 peoples’ continued sense of belonging to Abkhazia as their homeland, sometimes even across
38 generations, and their devotion to the idea of an eventual return (e.g. Kabachnik, Regulaska, and
39 Mitchneck 2010; Grono 2011; Kabachnik 2012; Lundgren 2015).

1 The scholarship on the post-war developments within Abkhazia, on the other hand, has
2 mostly looked at the re-making of the political landscape, focusing in particular on de facto
3 state-building and democratization (e.g. Berg and Mölder 2012; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012).
4 There have also been studies on inter-ethnic relations and minority rights in contemporary
5 Abkhazia (e.g. Clogg 2008; Trier, Lohm, and Szakonyi 2010), as well as a number of
6 publications on the political economy of conflict protraction (e.g. Prelz Oltramonti 2015a,
7 2015b). However, while this literature helps to understand what there was to be gained
8 politically and economically from the perspective of the de facto authorities, it rarely addresses
9 how ordinary people experienced mass expulsion and its aftermath.³

10 This paper therefore takes a different approach and explores the aftermath of ethnic
11 violence in connection with mass displacement from the perspective of *those who stayed*
12 *behind*, i.e. the ethnic Abkhazians⁴ who took over evacuated property. How have they come to
13 terms with the disappearance of a large part of the pre-war population? In other words, how
14 have ordinary Abkhaz people coped with the violence that has been inflicted on the out-group?
15 Research in social psychology suggests that instead of acknowledgment and guilt, denial is a
16 common reaction to atrocities committed by the in-group (Cohen 2001). According to Bandura
17 (1999), perpetrators tend to use various moral disengagement strategies, such as moral
18 justification and dehumanization, to cognitively restructure the harmful conduct into an
19 acceptable one. What strategies of moral disengagement can we find in Abkhazia? And to what
20 extent can we also find moments of moral *re-engagement*? As Brubaker (2004), among others,
21 has argued, war and violent conflict tend to result in group crystallization and maximum ethnic
22 antagonism. But what happens after the polarizing “event” of war is over and the euphoria
23 about one’s victory begins to fade? In the case of Abkhazia, the end of the war did not coincide
24 with a settlement. Unlike in post-conflict societies, where an official peace deal has been made,
25 people living in protracted, intractable conflict can never quite afford to “move on” and
26 “forget,” as the conflict continues to provide the background against which their lives are
27 organized.⁵ To what extent did doubts about the rightfulness of what happened surface?

28 To capture the “cycles of hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment” (Pelkmans 2013, 3)
29 characteristic of the human experience, the project takes a distinct ethnographic approach
30 aimed at gleaning “the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and
31 political reality” (Schatz 2009, 5). As anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans (2013, 5) has noted,
32 through its practice of “living for prolonged periods of time in the midst of people who are
33 pondering different options, who are voicing their hopes, frustrations and disillusionments,”
34 ethnography is particularly suited for “catching doubt in midair.” The data was therefore

1 collected during eight months of fieldwork over a period of two years (starting in late 2016) in
2 Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi and a village in the Ochamchira district, which had a mixed
3 Georgian-Abkhaz population before the war and is now predominantly Abkhaz.⁶ To
4 understand how ordinary people have been making sense of war and displacement, I was
5 particularly interested in the collective narratives that ethnic Abkhazians employ when talking
6 about the violent events of the early 90s. Rather than mere representations of past events ("what
7 really happened"), narratives are "social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of
8 historical and current events; they are accounts of a community's collective experiences,
9 embodied in its belief system and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared
10 identity" (Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006, 20). They "address issues not only about what happened
11 but also about why it happened and who or what was responsible" (Bar-Siman-Tov 2014, 29).

12 Even though, as a Western foreigner, I was exposed to significant levels of mistrust due
13 to the West's unwillingness to recognize Abkhazia's independence, I also encountered a great
14 deal of curiosity and openness especially among so-called "ordinary people" (*prostoi narod*)
15 which allowed me to participate in their lives and interact in an open and relaxed manner.⁷
16 Overall, forty-five people participated in my research, out of which ten were so-called "key
17 informants," with whom I was in contact on a regular basis.⁸ Among them were farmers,
18 teachers, petty traders, racketeers, taxi drivers, and nurses, i.e. they were non-elite, non-expert
19 actors. Given my thematic focus, my interlocutors were predominantly ethnic Abkhazians who
20 still remember peaceful pre-war cohabitation while also having had first-hand experience of
21 the violence during the war. Although I was expected to bond with local women of a similar
22 age, my encounters were mixed in terms of gender; however, it was often men who spoke more
23 extensively.⁹ While many of my male contacts fought in the war, none of them identified as
24 having been involved in atrocities against Georgians. I did not push participants to share
25 sensitive information; to borrow Liisa Malkki's (1995, 51) words, "the success of the fieldwork
26 hinged not so much on a determination to ferret out 'the facts' as on a willingness to leave
27 some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate
28 my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted."

29 Throughout this article, I quote from informal conversations written down post factum
30 and – to a lesser extent – from taped interviews.¹⁰ The data analysis proceeded in two steps:
31 First, I identified recurring statements and themes through thematic analysis. Drawing on
32 ethnographic approaches to narrative analysis (see Cortazzi 2001; Gubrium and Holstein
33 2008), I then analyzed their narrative structure, i.e. what kind of stories are being told and how
34 they both reflect and constitute boundaries between self and other, victim and perpetrator, as

1 well as their narrative environment, more specifically the “social situations, their actors, and
2 action in relation to narratives” (Gubrium and Holstein 2008, 250). To contextualize the data
3 collected during participant observation, I also used written sources, including
4 contemporaneous and more recent accounts of the war by both local and international
5 observers, as well as a performance by a group of Abkhaz comedians that was recorded and
6 posted on YouTube and provides some insight into the larger societal relevance of the issue.

7 I begin this article by providing a brief overview of the dynamics of violence during
8 the war based on data collected by international observers. Drawing on my own material, I then
9 present the main narratives that my contacts employed to make sense of the war and justify the
10 violence that was committed. I identify four dominant narratives which all follow a common
11 logic of collective victimhood, according to which displacement is regarded as a something
12 that the Georgians brought upon themselves, making the Abkhaz the “true” victim of the
13 conflict. Next, I explore how victimization is challenged by looking at the moral discourse
14 surrounding the so-called “trophy houses,” i.e. Georgian houses that have been appropriated
15 by Abkhaz in the course of the violent conflict, a phenomenon that was widely condemned by
16 my contacts as a violation the Abkhaz moral code. I then analyze how my informants made
17 sense of this counter-discourse and whether it has the potential to undermine the narrative of
18 victimization and, ultimately, national identity. I argue that while the stories around the trophy
19 houses reveal as well as reproduce divisions that have come to be characteristic of post-war
20 Abkhazia, they are also an expression of an intimate knowledge and thus function as “true”
21 markers of national belonging.

22 23 **The dynamics of violence**

24
25 In order to understand how ethnic Abkhazians have made sense of the mass displacement of
26 people they used to live amongst, it is important not to look at the displacement as an isolated
27 event and instead pay attention to the larger dynamics of violence that unfolded during the
28 war.¹¹ Reports by international observers attest to a vicious cycle of violence and counter-
29 violence characteristic of many conflicts across regions. When the Georgian troops, consisting
30 of the paramilitary National Guard and Mkhedrioni (“Knights”), entered Abkhazia in August
31 1992, a wave of violence directed against mostly ethnic Abkhazians caused many to flee the
32 areas under Georgian control (United Nations 1993, para. 11; HRW 1995, 21).¹² The majority
33 of Sukhumi’s Abkhaz residents fled the city over the course of a few weeks, seeking refuge in
34 Abkhaz-dominated territory in and around the town of Gudauta. From there, Abkhaz began to

1 counter-mobilize with the help of volunteer fighters from outside the region, mostly the
2 northern Caucasus but also Turkey, which is home to a large Abkhaz diaspora. At the beginning
3 of October, they were able to take control of Gagra, causing the flight of thousands of local
4 Georgians in response to atrocities committed against Georgians (United Nations 1993, para.
5 18; HRW 1995, 26).

6 Over the course of the first half of 1993, the Abkhaz forces organized several major but
7 unsuccessful attacks on Sukhumi. At the end of July, the conflicting parties agreed to a cease-
8 fire; it obliged both sides to withdraw heavy weapons from Sukhumi but was later broken by
9 Abkhaz forces (HRW 1995, 41). On September 27, the region's capital came under Abkhaz
10 control, causing the retreat of the Georgian troops from Abkhazia. As the UN Security Council
11 (1993, para. 35) reported, "[a]fter the Abkhazian forces had taken Sukhumi, most Georgians
12 living in the region between the Gumista and Inguri Rivers tried to flee before the arrival of
13 the Abkhazian forces. Some others who stayed behind were reportedly killed when the
14 Abkhazians took control of villages and cities in Ochamchira region." Officials of the Georgian
15 government estimated that over 250,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia – a number that has been
16 contested by Abkhazian authorities (Dale 1997, 83).¹³

17 Although the defeat of the Georgian troops and the flight of the majority of the Georgian
18 population brought the war to an end, as neither the Georgian government nor the international
19 community recognized the Abkhaz victory as legitimate but, instead, continued to insist on the
20 return of the displaced, the conflict has remained unresolved. While their houses and
21 apartments were usually either destroyed or appropriated by Abkhaz and members of other
22 nationalities, many of those who were displaced still regard Abkhazia as their homeland,
23 hoping to return eventually (e.g. Toria et al. 2019).

24

25 **"We are the victims here:" Strategies of moral disengagement**

26

27 As social psychologist Daniel Bar-Tal (2000, 352) noted in his work on the psychological
28 foundations of protracted conflict, more than in any other situation, people who are confronted
29 with war engage in cognitive activities that help them to understand what is happening: "First,
30 they strive to explain the conflict situation, which often causes stress and uncertainty. They try
31 to find answers to such questions as why the conflict erupted, which side is responsible for its
32 outbreak, what are the intentions of the adversary group members, and so on." These attempts
33 to make sense of war and violence lead to the emergence of certain collective narratives – or
34 stories – that help give meaning to events that were experienced as deeply disruptive.

1 When ethnic Abkhazians speak about the war, they usually refer to the Georgian
2 aggression they experienced, in particular at the earlier stages of the conflict. As social
3 psychologists have noted, a sense of victimization or collective victimhood – whereby each
4 party sees itself as the exclusive victim, despite the existence of evidence contradicting this –
5 is a common phenomenon across conflicts (e.g. Noor et al. 2012; Vollhardt 2012). It allows
6 those concerned to morally disengage from the atrocities committed by the in-group.
7 According to social identity theory, people seek to maintain a positive image of the groups they
8 identify with and that therefore form an important part of their identities as individuals (Tajfel
9 and Turner 1986). While grounded in real, traumatic events, seeing one’s own group as the
10 victim helps to maintain a positive image as a member of the group and enables people to
11 regard counter-action through the prism of defense (Bar-Tal 2013).¹⁴

12 Based on my field notes, I identify four recurring narratives that my contacts drew upon
13 when talking about the atrocities that happened: war, ethno-nationalism or nativism, betrayal
14 and, finally, revenge. All four narratives are interrelated and can be subsumed under a larger
15 discourse of collective victimhood, according to which displacement is seen as an inevitable
16 result of Georgian aggression.

17

18 *The narrative of war*

19

20 While accounts of mass atrocities often focus on the role of nationalist ideologies or grievances
21 as key mobilizing factors, there is also an important interrelation between warfare and ethnic
22 violence (see, e.g., Straus 2006). Many of my interlocutors stressed that the events on August
23 14 unfolded in accordance with a military logic of defense: The Georgians attacked and the
24 Abkhaz counter-mobilized in order to defend their state, their villages and their families. When
25 I asked if the Abkhaz could have reacted differently to the Georgian troops, my contacts
26 typically responded: “Who attacked whom? Did *we* attack them, or what? They did not give
27 us a choice other than to defend ourselves.”¹⁵

28 According to the narrative of war, the Georgian side lost in a battle that it had itself
29 provoked and the consequences of which it has been refusing to face ever since the Abkhaz
30 victory. Separation in the form of the expulsion of the “hostile” Georgian population and
31 independent state-building are seen as a legitimate response to this refusal, as it is the only way
32 to prevent more violence.¹⁶ In line with this thinking, it is their own government, not the
33 Abkhaz administration or their Russian patron, which those on the Georgian side should blame
34 for their loss.

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The ethno-nationalist or nativist narrative

Even though Abkhazia had been an autonomous republic (ASSR) within Soviet Georgia, by the time the Soviet Union collapsed and the war broke out, there was a widespread understanding among the Abkhaz community that Abkhazia was their exclusive homeland (see Shesterinina 2014), a perception that had long been cultivated by the Soviet territorialization of national identity through homeland republics (Kaiser 1994). The notion of the exclusive homeland owned by the titular nation played an important role in how people made sense of the Abkhaz counter-mobilization. For instance, my contacts typically conceptualized the two conflicting parties as *neighbors*. As one male interlocutor in his early 40s told me: “Imagine that your neighbor comes to your house and says: ‘This is mine now!’ How would you react? Surely you wouldn’t let somebody take what is yours.”

Instances of violence were hence quickly framed as heroic acts of the liberation of one’s land (*zemlia*) or homeland (*rodina*) from alien intruders whose aim was not just to “take” Abkhazia, but to annihilate the Abkhaz people. A hostile, anti-Abkhaz rhetoric by leaders of the Georgian national movement during the perestroika years had already exacerbated fears of extinction among the Abkhaz population, and when the war broke out, it increasingly came to be understood as an attempt to cleanse the land of ethnic Abkhazians. Many of my informants cited statements made by Georgian officials as examples, such as the public warning by Georgian commander-in-chief Giorgi Karkarashvili that if 100,000 Georgians lost their lives, all 97,000 Abkhazians would be killed, leaving the Abkhaz nation without descendants (see Circassianworld 2008). They also often referred to the destruction of the state historical archive of Abkhazia and the archive of the *Institute of Abkhaz Language, History and Literature* in October 1992 as another proof for Georgia’s genocidal intent.

While remarks like “they thought they could get rid of us and that would solve the problem” or “they were promised an Abkhazia without Abkhaz” were frequent during my fieldwork, the expulsion of the local Georgians, on the other hand, was not seen as a form of ethnic cleansing. As Georgian historians attempted to portray the Abkhaz as “immigrants” from the North Caucasus, Abkhaz intellectuals reacted by stressing the historical roots of the local Georgians in Western Georgia, thereby denying any historical attachment of the Georgian population to the Abkhazian territory.¹⁷ For them, it was the Georgians, and in particular the Mingrelians,¹⁸ who had taken over their land after large numbers of ethnic Abkhazians and related groups had been exiled to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century,

1 which left large parts of Abkhazia depopulated.¹⁹ As a consequence, they increasingly
2 understood the expulsion of the Georgian population not as a *departure from* but a *return to*
3 their homeland. As one of my contacts who fought in the war explained to me: “We did not
4 kick anyone out. Everyone went where they belonged.”

6 *The narrative of betrayal*

8 Despite the surge in ethnic antagonism, ethno-nationalism and nativism were not the only
9 prisms through which people made sense of what was happening around them. While the ethnic
10 Abkhazians I spoke to unequivocally saw Abkhazia as their exclusive homeland, given that by
11 1989 45.7% of the inhabitants were Georgian, many ethnic Abkhazians had grown up in mixed
12 neighborhoods and it was therefore widely acknowledged that a local community had existed
13 before the war that was cross-ethnic or, as my contacts put it, “international”
14 (*internatsional’nyi*). Consequently, a frequent distinction was made between “local
15 Georgians,” on the one hand, and those from outside of Abkhazia who lacked familiarity with
16 Abkhazia’s vernacular culture, on the other. Many interlocutors stressed that relations only
17 turned sour when the local Georgians came under the increasing influence of the propaganda
18 of the Georgian nationalist movement and chose to support the troops that entered Abkhazia
19 instead of the Abkhaz neighbors they had grown up with.

20 According to the logic of betrayal, then, Georgians first and foremost had to go not
21 because they lacked historical roots in Abkhazia, but because they turned their back on the
22 *local* community of which they had been a part. By supporting the Georgian troops that entered
23 Abkhazia and committed large-scale violence against ethnic Abkhazians, they forfeited their
24 claim to membership in the multinational community they were once part of. Even those who
25 did not actively participate in the fighting were assigned blame: My contacts often conceded
26 that there were many innocent people who got caught up in a war they did not want and I was
27 also told of cases where Georgians helped their Abkhaz neighbors, which demonstrates that
28 not all cross-ethnic ties that existed before the war were automatically suspended.²⁰ However,
29 having failed to mobilize against the Georgian troops, *all* Georgians seemed complicit. My
30 interlocutors would frequently say: “Why didn’t they defend us? Why didn’t they stand up
31 against the troops and say: ‘Let us and our neighbors live in peace, we don’t want you here!’”
32 In their understanding, it was again the Georgians who brought about their own suffering, either
33 through action (fighting) or inaction (failing to protest).

1 *The narrative of justified revenge*

2

3 When asked about the atrocities committed against Georgians after the Abkhazian victory, one
4 of my key informants explained:

5 Those who committed atrocities were people who had been brutalized (*zverevshie*).
6 I knew a man whose daughter, son-in-law and grandchild were killed by Georgians
7 coming into their house. [...] Now imagine what the brother would do if he had the
8 opportunity... I remember how we went to Ochamchira to tell him that his sister
9 and her family had been killed, killed for *nothing*... his heart turned into a stone.
10 [...] You know, there are cases when somebody does something to you and that
11 gives you a reason (*povod*) to get back at them. They did, in fact, give us a reason.

12

13 This statement provides an important glimpse into the vicious circle of bloodshed, pointing to
14 the prior experience of violence – especially of people that are close, such as family members
15 – as a key factor in the formation of a desire for vengeance that triggers a process of
16 antagonistic collective categorization where “a whole category of people is blamed for the
17 actions of one or a few” (Straus 2006, 165). While revenge plays a role in many conflicts
18 regardless of the cultural context, vengeance was potentially more powerful in a society like
19 Abkhazia, where it has been embedded in the culture through the custom of blood revenge for
20 centuries and is therefore not, in principle, regarded as transgressive. According to Abkhaz
21 custom, a man is required to avenge injustices committed against his family and the failure to
22 do so is traditionally regarded as dishonorable (see Inal-Ipa 1960); as anthropologist Sula Benet
23 (Benet 1974, 65) noted, “[n]ot to take vengeance is the greatest disgrace conceivable.”

24 Viewed from the perspective of blood revenge, the displacement of the local Georgians
25 can thus be seen as an appropriate response to earlier atrocities committed against Abkhazians,
26 and therefore as a form of retributive justice. Although traditionally an intra-group
27 phenomenon, anecdotal evidence indicates that the custom of blood revenge played a role in
28 the way that the Georgian refugees were treated and how this was looked upon by others. After
29 her first trip to post-war Abkhazia in 1994, anthropologist Paula Garb (1995, 43) reported: “I
30 heard stories of Abkhazian soldiers who, immediately after liberating occupied territory,
31 committed crimes against Georgian families that resembled the crimes that were committed by
32 Georgian troops against their own families. This can happen after any war, but in Abkhazian
33 culture it is perceived through the prism of the rules of blood revenge and therefore condoned,
34 or at least, not condemned.”

1 Unsurprisingly, the narrative of justified revenge rarely features in public accounts, most
2 likely because of the possible harm that it would do to Abkhazia’s international reputation, but
3 also because it could suggest that Abkhaz fighters might have been driven by personal motives
4 rather than national heroism. Similarly, even though the narrative of betrayal invokes a notion
5 of collective blame based on the failure of local Georgians to mobilize against the Georgian
6 troops, it does not deny the previous proximity that existed between many local Georgians and
7 ethnic Abkhazians, and in doing so differs from – and potentially challenges – public accounts
8 that stress the ancient divisions between the Georgians and Abkhaz. However, despite certain
9 differences, what all four narratives have in common is the fundamental idea that mass
10 displacement was a justified punitive response to violence and violations committed by the
11 Georgian troops and their local supporters. As the narrative analysis reveals, blame for the
12 atrocities – committed against ethnic Abkhazians by Georgians and vice-versa – is exclusively
13 attributed to the Georgians, who are perceived to be responsible not only for the suffering of
14 the Abkhaz, but also *their own*.

15 Hence, whereas the international community and the Georgian government saw those
16 displaced persecuted by ruthless separatists supported by Russia and demanded their
17 immediate safe return, the dominant frame among ethnic Abkhazians was that, having not only
18 politically supported the violence against the Abkhaz population but also taken an active part
19 in its execution, Georgians were the perpetrators.²¹ That the international community would
20 side with the perpetrators (supporting Abkhazia’s re-integration into Georgia and the return of
21 those who were expelled) and punish the victims by isolating and not recognizing Abkhazia’s
22 independence consequently seemed beyond comprehension to many.

23

24 **Limits of victimhood: the Georgian “trophy house”**

25

26 When the Georgians fled they had to evacuate their properties, and although some of their
27 dwellings were burnt down, often with only the staircase left standing, others remained intact.²²
28 Known as “trophy houses” (*trofeinye doma*), or “trophy flats” (*trofeinye kvartiry*), they were
29 appropriated by ethnic Abkhazians as a reward for defeating the enemy. As Gerard Toal and
30 Carl Dahlman (2011) demonstrated in their study of the re-making of post-war Bosnia, ethnic
31 cleansing is not only about removing “an ethnically defined group from one territory to a
32 perceived external homeland” (Ther 2012, 143) in a narrow sense; the appropriation of what is
33 left behind constitutes a fundamental part of how power relations are reorganized:

1 Housing, land, and valuables are stolen from victims. Businesses and factory jobs
2 are suddenly vacated and available to those who want to profit from the new
3 ethnocratic order. This entrepreneurial violence seizes power and frees up assets
4 that are distributed to buy the complicity of those marginally or not directly
5 involved in the coup de violence. Widespread denial of the founding moment of
6 violence follows as the new order consolidates itself. (Toal and Dahlman 2011,
7 116–17)

8
9 What makes displacement violent is therefore not only physical assault or the threat thereof,
10 but also what comes after: the take-over of people’s homes. While the term “trophy” was
11 generally used to refer to all kinds of objects left behind by the Georgians upon their defeat,
12 there was a peculiar violence to the act of appropriating people’s houses. According to
13 anthropologists Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995, 2), there is an intimate link
14 between the house and the body: “The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin,
15 carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide
16 and protect.”

17 A survey conducted in 2010 among displaced Georgians confirmed that the thought of
18 one’s house being occupied by other people was indeed unbearable for many. According to the
19 report based on the survey, “[n]early half [of the respondents] resent that other people live in
20 their houses, and one in eight would rather see the house destroyed than someone else living
21 in it, possibly preferring their ‘own ruins’ to an intact house currently owned by others” (Grono
22 2011, 12). And yet, as my fieldwork revealed, it was not only the displaced who struggled to
23 come to terms with the occupation of their properties. During the months I spent in Abkhazia,
24 my interlocutors regularly and often unexpectedly voiced their disapproval of the occupation
25 of trophy houses. For instance, when discussing the difficult housing situation in Sukhumi, one
26 of my close contacts, an Abkhaz man in his early 70s, told me that even if he was given the
27 opportunity, he would not want to live in a Georgian flat. When I asked for his reasons, he
28 explained:

29 Why not? The Mingrelians who work at the markets in Moscow, they curse the
30 Abkhaz who took over Georgian property, they only wish us the worst! ... For me
31 it’s about bad energy (*plokhaia energetika*), do you understand? Others don’t care,
32 but I think it’s bad ... To live in somebody else’s house, to take over somebody
33 else’s property, something somebody else has worked for his whole life, I don’t
34 want that. I am not that kind of person; that’s not how I’ve been raised.

35

1 Telling me about his attempt to convince his family to acquire a trophy house, another one of
2 my informants – an Abkhaz man in his late 30s – made a similar point:

3 Everyone in my family was categorically against it I actually challenged them
4 and said: “These people have been fighting against us, they have been killing us,
5 why can’t we take their houses?” But my uncle kept saying: “These walls will curse
6 us!” For him, somebody else’s house was somebody else’s work (*chuzhoi trud*); he
7 was convinced that we would be able to succeed on our own, not relying on other
8 people’s things. Eventually, I did get a flat in Sukhum, but it was in one of those
9 apartment blocks that were being built when the war started and so no one had lived
10 there before. In that sense, I acquired only “naked walls.”

11
12 These excerpts from my field notes illustrate how despite the high degree of hostility vis-à-vis
13 the Georgians, and particularly the displaced, the idea of living in their former homes – the
14 most personal space imaginable – did cause great unease among certain Abkhaz people.
15 Strikingly similar to what anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 191) observed in
16 Northern Cyprus, where former Greek houses now inhabited by Turkish Cypriots “are always
17 tinged with anxiety, arising from their past ownership,” the trophy house in Abkhazia seemed
18 to discharge negative affects, in particular shame, that were absent from the public discourse.
19 Unlike the omnipresent monuments and billboards that commemorate Abkhazian war heroes
20 and the portraits of lost husbands and sons that decorate people’s homes, reminding them of
21 their own victimhood, the trophy houses appeared to be material reminders of a moral
22 transgression and therefore a threat to collective victimhood.

23 As becomes clear from my interlocutors’ statements, such emotions were not only
24 sustained through the material presence of trophy houses, but also through widely-held
25 “magical,” or “superstitious” beliefs, which have a long tradition among the Abkhaz (see Dbar
26 2000; Tarba 2008) and also played their role in the context of the conflict. During my
27 fieldwork, many of my interlocutors told me that they believed that the displaced had cursed
28 the Abkhaz and that this has adversely affected Abkhaz society in many ways.²³ As one of my
29 interlocutors put it, “they [the displaced] burn candles in their homes and wish us the worst.
30 [...]. We have suffered a lot because of that.” Many seemed to believe that those who occupied
31 trophy houses were particularly prone to bad luck.²⁴ Stories were circulating about families
32 that suffered as a result: For example, one contact told me about a trophy house not far from
33 Sukhumi that was abandoned even though it had been fully renovated by its post-war
34 inhabitants, who had planned to turn it into a hotel. However, after a series of tragic events that

1 happened to the occupants, it became regarded as “unfortunate“ (*neschastnyi*) and was shunned
2 not only by the family concerned but everyone in the neighborhood.

3 While I was not able to establish the extent to which these magical rituals had actually
4 been exercised, that many of my interlocutors strongly believed in their power demonstrated
5 that those who were displaced continued to pose a threat in spite of the physical separation. In
6 some ways, the curses became a convenient excuse for many of the negative events that
7 happened in post-war Abkhazia, such as the rising number of fatal car accidents. But the
8 distress surrounding the trophy houses was more than the result of an externally imposed fear
9 of revenge; it was also grounded in genuine doubts about the morality of the appropriation.
10 One interlocutor, for instance, explained that one of the reasons why his father opposed the
11 acquisition of a trophy house was that he had grown up in Sukhumi and was therefore
12 personally acquainted with many of the former Georgian inhabitants. This implied that the act
13 of appropriation was somewhat easier for those coming from other regions who were
14 unfamiliar with the local social fabric.²⁵ Like Rebecca Bryant (2014, 685) observed in the
15 context of the conflict in Cyprus, the act of appropriation caused not only a violation of “the
16 intimacy of the home,” but also of “relations of interdependency in the village” (or, in our case,
17 the city). As we can see, this violation was not only felt among the displaced but to some extent
18 also among those who stayed behind.

19 At the same time, distress did not necessarily depend on knowledge of the previous
20 owners. For many, it was primarily grounded in a concern about how the appropriation of
21 Georgian property reflected on Abkhaz identity more broadly. In their understanding, acquiring
22 a trophy house was a violation of the Abkhaz moral code, stressing that “this is not the way we
23 do it (*po-nashenski*),” or “this is not in accordance with our principles (*poniatii*).” Therefore,
24 rather than feeling guilt vis-à-vis the displaced and their suffering, they were consumed by
25 shame vis-à-vis *their own group*. In their view, whatever the circumstances, a true Abkhaz is
26 not supposed to take “what is not his.” According to Abkhaz custom, there are certain rules for
27 how the enemy should be treated (Inal-Ipa 1960; Benet 1974). This is well illustrated in one of
28 the short stories by the famous Abkhazian author Fazil Iskander. In *The Tale of Old Khabug’s*
29 *Mule*, Iskander (1983) describes how the protagonist Sandro shows his father a house which is
30 for sale. When the old man realizes that the previous owners, a Greek couple, had been arrested
31 by the Soviet authorities and deported to Siberia, and that the house was now offered by the
32 city council to the “most deserving” people, his mood changes instantly:

1 “My son,” he began in a quiet and terrible voice, “before, if a blood avenger killed
2 his enemy, he touched not a button on his clothes. He took the body to the enemy’s
3 house, laid it on the ground, and called to his family for them to take in their dead
4 man clean, undefiled by the touch of an animal. That’s the way it was. These men,
5 now, kill innocent people and tear their clothes off them to sell cheap to their
6 lackeys. You can buy this house, but I will never set foot in it, nor will you ever
7 cross the threshold of my house!” (Iskander 1983, 252)

8
9 While the very act of punishment seemed to follow the Abkhaz code of honor at least to some
10 extent, it had to be performed according to a cultural code that did not include the take-over of
11 alien property. In contrast to the heroic act of the liberation of the “homeland” that strengthened
12 Abkhazian identity as a proud “warrior people,” the appropriation of people’s *homes* was
13 perceived as disgraceful, especially in the case of those who took more than they actually
14 needed, and hence harmful to the image of the group as a whole. It was one thing to punish
15 someone, but another to *materially benefit* from it, which created a unique causal link between
16 the position of the occupier and the suffering of the displaced.

17 References to the trophy house thus invoked a discourse of civility that challenged the
18 absolute innocence of the Abkhaz people. In doing so, it helped to moderate relations across
19 the conflict divide – something that I was able to witness first-hand on a trip to one of
20 Abkhazia’s remote mountain areas, where my Abkhaz host took me to visit a Georgian couple
21 he knew from before the war. Although they had fled and were now based in Tbilisi, the couple
22 managed to keep their house in Abkhazia and continued to visit regularly. Nevertheless, my
23 host had not seen them since the war, so when we arrived and sat down at the table, the woman
24 asked awkwardly: “How have you been doing?” Hesitating for a moment, my Abkhaz contact
25 replied: “Well... I was studying at the Institute, and then, after the war, I remained in the village
26 and started a family. We bought a small house at the other side of the village... *I didn’t want to*
27 *take a trophy house and I also made sure that no one in our family did.*” By introducing the
28 topic of the trophy house at the outset of the conversation, he indicated that although he and
29 his hosts might inevitably find themselves on different sides of the conflict divide, there were
30 certain lines that he would not cross. Thus, in order to demonstrate the moral integrity of his
31 family, he distanced them from those who did engage in looting. But by doing so, he was not
32 disassociating himself and his family from the in-group; instead, he asserted their identity as
33 “true” Abkhaz.

34
35 ***The “new Abkhazians:” From inter- to intra-ethnic conflict***

1

2 At the same time, the disapproval of the trophy house was not only driven by a sense of
3 violation vis-à-vis the displaced, but also an injustice committed by members of the in-group
4 against their own. First, having become victims of Georgian aggression and, second, having
5 missed out in a process of post-displacement redistribution of property that came to be seen as
6 deeply unfair, for many, the post-war period was in fact characterized by a sense of double
7 victimization. Therefore, while the trophy house constitutes a key site at which the conflict
8 between Georgians and Abkhaz played out in its most intimate ways, it also forms the center
9 of another, intra-group struggle over who can rightfully claim abandoned property, raising not
10 only questions of ownership but also of collective identity.

11 My interlocutors generally remembered the redistribution of property as a chaotic and
12 unregulated process that happened according to what came to be known as the *printsip zaniato*
13 (“occupied principle”). On a “first come, first served” basis, people entered homes and claimed
14 informal ownership by writing *zaniato* (“occupied”) at the entrance gate or on the walls of a
15 dwelling. In this process, people occupied not only so-called “Georgian houses,” but all kinds
16 of valuable properties, including sanatoriums and industrial enterprises. The anarchic re-
17 distribution of these raised questions about redistributive justice directed no longer at the
18 Georgian “enemy,” but their own people. As an Abkhaz man in his late 60s recalled:

19 The [occupation of] Georgian houses was one thing, but some people occupied
20 whole rest homes or factories. Take the hotel *Inter-Sukhum* as an example ... I
21 remember, after the war I went inside and saw a couple of guys sitting there. I asked
22 them: “What were you fighting for? For the hotel or your homeland?” They hadn’t
23 built anything themselves, not paid a single penny; I don’t see how they deserved
24 it. Why do they deserve it and I don’t?

25

26 That concerns with the treatment of Georgians were often overshadowed by a preoccupation
27 with one’s own perceived marginalized position in the new post-war order became particularly
28 evident when I was picked up outside an apartment block by a taxi driver with whom I had
29 been in regular contact, an Abkhaz man in his late 50s from the mining town of Tkvarcheli
30 (now named *Tkuarchal* by the Abkhaz but still widely referred to as Tkvarcheli). When he
31 arrived, he stopped and looked around suspiciously. After a short silence, he said: “Georgians
32 used to live here. There were no Abkhaz here before the war.” However, what first struck me
33 as pity for the displaced soon turned out to be *self*-pity: He explained to me that, having left for
34 Russia after the war, he returned to Abkhazia at a time when “everything was already taken.”

1 Now he barely earned enough money to rent a room on the outskirts of Sukhumi and provide
2 for his family. Looking at the relatively well-maintained apartment block, he seemed primarily
3 consumed with resentment towards those who managed to get “a slice of the action.” When an
4 expensive SUV with a young man in the driver’s seat drove around the corner, he shouted:
5 “Did your father sell a couple of Georgian houses and buy you a fancy car?! Fascists
6 (*fashisty*)!”

7 A 2008 performance by the popular group of Abkhaz comedians *Narty iz Abkhazii*,
8 which one of my close contacts posted on Facebook, further illustrates this dynamic. Titled
9 *mistika v trofeinom dome* (“supernatural phenomena in the trophy house”) (Vakhtang 2017), it
10 depicts the suffering of an Abkhaz occupant of a trophy house, who is haunted by the spirit of
11 its former inhabitants. It begins with a conversation between the new occupants – an Abkhaz
12 man and his – as it later turns out – Mingrelian wife about how lucky they are with their new
13 home:

14

15 - Husband [in Abkhaz]: “Holy moly, what a great house... Are you listening to
16 me? I’ve never seen such a house!”

17 - Wife [in Russian]: “Yes, if our house hadn’t been burnt down during the
18 war, we’d still live in that henhouse [*kuriatnik*] and not in these mansions
19 [*khoromi*]!”

20 - Husband [in Russian]: Thank God that it was burnt down [crosses himself]!
21 [audience laughs]

22

23 After the couple goes to bed, the husband awakes to strange, ghost-like noises. Suddenly, a
24 voice asks:

25 - “[Russian with Mingrelian accent] Isn’t life good in someone else’s house, yes?”
26 [laughter, applause]

27

28 In panic, the husband turns to his wife, who can’t hear anything herself:

29

30 - Husband [in Abkhaz] to his wife: “Ey you, what’s with you, didn’t you hear just
31 now??”

32 - Wife [in Russian]: “No, what’s wrong with you?!”

33 - Husband [screams in panic]: “Who is there??”

34 - “The owner, the owner, the owner ...”

35 - Husband [screaming]: “What owner?? Listen, I am the owner here!”

36 - “The former, the former, the former ...”

37

1 At the end of the performance, the husband is about to fall asleep to a modified version of the
2 famous Soviet-era lullaby “The tired toys are sleeping” (*spiat ustal’ie igrushki*), performed by
3 the spirits: “Asleep are the tired Abkhaz, together they sleep ... ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, on our blankets
4 and pillows they sleep, may you go to hell (...) In this house you go to bed, so that you dream
5 of us at night, your eyes closed and never open again.” When the Abkhaz occupant realizes
6 that it is in fact a death spell, he awakes and jumps up in panic.

7 The performance, which was videotaped and uploaded onto YouTube in 2017, caused
8 much outrage among Georgians, who saw it as a confirmation of Abkhaz “ruthlessness” and
9 “moral decline.”²⁶ However, in the perception of my interlocutors, the performance was not
10 mocking the plight of the former owner, but that of the Abkhaz inhabitant who had enriched
11 himself and was now haunted by an evil spirit. A local journalist explained to me:

12 Internally, the topic of trophy houses has always aroused gossip. Depending on the
13 circumstances certain people occupied certain properties: For example, if their own
14 house was burnt down by Georgians during the war, and there were thousands such
15 cases, then such an ‘exchange’ was seen as just. [...] But when someone occupied
16 five houses, and then sold them, then they were made fun of, but within their own
17 circle. And those folks who made the performance, they brought the topic to the
18 surface. And that’s unique, because it is one of the most closed intra-Abkhaz
19 discourses.

20

21 What the performance therefore depicts is a new *internal* other: ethnic Abkhazians who
22 enriched themselves by taking over Georgian properties. In doing so, it illustrates how
23 appropriation could evoke schadenfreude about the plight of those benefitting from the
24 acquisition of trophy houses not only among the displaced, but – albeit for different reasons –
25 also among co-ethnics. In this context, it is the Abkhaz who did not materially gain from the
26 war who sympathize with the displaced in their pursuit of vengeance against a new, privileged
27 segment of society. Similar to the “new Russians” who are said to have become rich by dubious
28 means and known for their lavish lifestyle, in Abkhazia war and displacement produced a class
29 of so-called “new Abkhaz” (*novye abkhaztsy*), who – together with their expensive cars – came
30 to symbolize the emergence of an unprecedented, overt materialism at the expense of the
31 traditional Abkhaz values of modesty, humility and self-restraint.

32 That the “values have changed” was one of the most frequent statements during my
33 fieldwork. As one interlocutor explained:

34 Nowadays, the value of a person is judged according to the car he owns and suit he
35 wears. Some people ask me: “Aren’t you ashamed to drive a car like that? You used

1 to have a Mercedes.” I tell them: “A car is a means of transportation. What
2 difference does it make if it’s a Mercedes or a Lada?” I’d rather be a good person
3 and have brains. What does the car bring you if you are an idiot? [...] You know, it
4 would be different if any of these people driving black cars today had earned the
5 money they were spending.

6
7 To many of my interlocutors, these new forms of inequality seemed to violate the promise that
8 armed resistance would not only end “Georgian domination,” but lead to the creation of a just
9 and equal Abkhazian society. As an older Abkhaz woman once joked, the Abkhaz had in some
10 ways become just like the Georgians: “The Abkhaz are a nation that likes to adopt bad things
11 from others. For example, the Georgians who lived here had a good life and were working –
12 *what we took from them is the ‘showing off’ but not the working* [laughs].” Similarly to what
13 both Bryant (2010) and Navaro-Yashin (2012) observed in Northern Cyprus, there was a sense
14 that post-war looting has corrupted the community, leading to a culture of occupation, in which
15 possessions were simply taken rather than earned through one’s own work. For those who saw
16 themselves as the material “losers” of the transition – especially members of the so-called
17 intelligentsia – distancing themselves from the trophy house (and other status symbols like
18 expensive cars) was therefore a way to restore or retain moral integrity in a drastically changing
19 environment, allowing them to feel like the “moral” winners while also belonging to a “true”
20 Abkhaz identity.

21 22 ***From narrative to narration: making sense of the counter-discourse***

23
24 The previous sections testified to significant cleavages among the Abkhaz, showing how, rather
25 than simply “purifying” society, the removal of the adversary can significantly affect the social
26 structure and culture of the remaining group and lead to changes that potentially threaten the
27 very cohesion that it was meant to produce, thus pointing to the significance of socio-economic
28 inequality as a driver of conflict. But what are the implications of this? To what extent does
29 the counter-discourse – and the underlying cleavages that it depicts – have the potential to
30 undermine collective identity?

31 In order to fully understand the significance of narratives, it is necessary to look beyond
32 the content as such and shift the focus from *what* is said to the act of storytelling itself. From
33 the analysis so far, it becomes clear that the critical counter-discourse fulfills important
34 performative functions for my interlocutors, both within the group and across groups. As I have
35 shown earlier, it facilitates communication across the conflict divide by signalling respect for

1 basic moral principles of inter-group behaviour that apply even in situations of conflict. At the
2 same time, distancing themselves from the trophy house also allowed them to elevate their
3 status *within* the group. Therefore, although the critical moral discourse appeared to exclude
4 certain members from the group by claiming that they were not “true Abkhazians,” it did not
5 challenge the boundary of the group as such. The material presented also suggests that the “new
6 Abkhaz” are seen as part of a more complex story that evoked some sympathy, as it was often
7 stressed that given the extent of displacement that many Abkhaz experienced at the hands of
8 the Georgian troops, certain “people had no choice” other than to move into vacant property
9 (see also Dale 1997, 100–101). This is also evident in the afore-mentioned comedy
10 performance, where the statement that “*if our house hadn’t been burnt down during the war,*
11 *we’d still live in that henhouse and not in these mansions*” clarifies from the outset that it was
12 not simply greed, but their own loss, that drove the couple to occupy a “trophy.” As a member
13 of the intelligentsia and native of Sukhumi put it: “Today many people don’t live in their own
14 house (*v svoem dome*). This is not only unfortunate for those who left, but also for those who
15 stayed... Because it means that someone was either forced to leave or killed. [...] But I don’t
16 judge those people who moved into abandoned houses; they needed a place to stay.”²⁷

17 Some sympathy was even expressed vis-à-vis those who did have a choice. Here, the
18 second part of the statements made at the beginning of the comedy performance gives an
19 important cue, as the audience not only learns that the couple had lost its own house prior to
20 appropriating a “trophy,” but that their own dwelling was poor in comparison (a “henhouse”).
21 Alluding to a larger discourse of Georgian imperial exploitation, it is indicated that among
22 those who benefitted from the war were many who, despite their titular status, had previously
23 occupied a marginalized position. This was also reflected in my interlocutors’ narratives, which
24 stressed that unlike the Abkhaz, the Georgians living in Abkhazia “had a great life.” As one
25 Abkhaz contact put it, when the Abkhaz “came down from the villages in the mountains and
26 went into the mansions owned by Georgians, seeing the luxury they were not just shocked, but
27 *appalled* (*v uzhase*).” Thus, what we can see here is how my interlocutors managed to integrate
28 the “new Abkhaz” into the larger logic of victimhood and the fate of the Abkhaz more
29 generally. Unlike the Georgians, whose negative behavior appeared only to confirm existing
30 prejudice, ethnic Abkhazians were seen as corrupted by circumstances but fundamentally good.
31 Negative experiences were rationalized through the hardship that the Abkhaz people had been
32 through, and were hence seen as part of a “common fate.”

33 Finally, despite people’s constant talk about feelings of estrangement from the people
34 around them, the very fact that the stories of the trophy houses were being told over and over

1 by people across Abkhazia also suggests that they themselves had become constitutive of
2 Abkhazia's post-war identity. While the laments around the trophy houses draw attention to
3 substantial intra-group divisions as well as some of the group's "dark sides," in my reading it
4 is exactly for this reason that they also function as intimate markers of collective belonging.
5 As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005) has argued, it is precisely the "embarrassing stuff"
6 – and not the official national culture presented to outsiders – that glues people together,
7 forming the basis of what he has famously termed "cultural intimacy." This helps to understand
8 why people were both reluctant and eager to tell these stories: They were reluctant because
9 they did not like an outsider to know "the dark sides" of their community, but at the same time
10 they wanted to share these stories precisely because they constituted "true" insider knowledge
11 that only they, as non-elite actors, were in a position to reveal – whether they admitted to having
12 actively participated in the looting or not, these stories marked them as insiders.²⁸ Although
13 the laments presented the occupation of Georgian homes as a threat to and the opposite of what
14 constitutes Abkhaz culture ("this is not who we really are"), as a reflection of the fundamental
15 changes that the group has been through and the struggles that this involved, they, in fact,
16 seemed to constitute a more intimate and authentic representation of a the culture of a
17 community that both experienced and perpetrated violence.

18 The notion of cultural intimacy might also explain the at times hysterical laughter with
19 which the audience reacted to the comedy performance. While I have so far focused mainly on
20 the script, much of the outrage among Georgian viewers was directed at the audience's overt
21 amusement, which seemed to signal a shocking lack of empathy. Based on my interlocutors'
22 reactions, I, in contrast, highlighted the *self*-mocking nature of the spectacle. But while self-
23 mockery is certainly a form of criticism, it also inevitably contains an element of sympathy or
24 affection. As Herzfeld (2005, 29) put it, "[n]ational embarrassment can become the iconic basis
25 of intimacy and affection, a fellowship of the flawed, within the private spaces of national
26 culture." In my reading, then, the hysterical laughter that some scenes provoked was grounded
27 in the "rueful self-recognition" (Herzfeld 2005, 6) that constitutes the core of cultural intimacy
28 and is always also affectionate, causing both embarrassment ("look at how greedy we've
29 become!") and secret pride ("look at how we made the best of a terrible situation!"). Thus,
30 when the spirit says "Isn't life good in someone else's house," it is as much a social critique as
31 it is an affirmation of Abkhaz (post-war) identity.

32

33 **Conclusion**

34

1 The narratives presented in this article reveal that in contrast to the international community
2 and the Georgian government, which see the ethnic Abkhazians as primarily perpetrators and
3 Georgians as victims of ethnic cleansing, ethnic Abkhazians themselves hold the opposite
4 view. According to my interlocutors' statements, the Abkhaz community, and not the
5 Georgian, was the ultimate victim in the conflict. In addition to a more abstract claim to
6 national self-determination grounded in the conception of Abkhazia as the exclusive homeland
7 of the Abkhaz, mass displacement was seen as a justified punishment for earlier atrocities
8 committed against the Abkhaz population by the Georgian troops, which ultimately made
9 peaceful co-existence inconceivable. From this perspective, the violence thus followed a logic
10 of self-defense, which did not only warrant the expulsion of the Georgian population, but also
11 a remedial right to secession.

12 This construction of collective victimhood allowed actors to displace responsibility for
13 any of the negative events that happened to the local Georgian population. Consequently, none
14 of my interlocutors overtly expressed sentiments of guilt or remorse in relation to the expulsion.
15 And yet, while the paper did not reveal any doubts about the rightfulness of displacement as
16 such, it nevertheless detected significant unease around the appropriation of Georgian property
17 – the so-called “trophy houses” – which was perceived as a violation of the Abkhaz cultural
18 code. To many, the trophy houses were a curse, both literally – as spaces haunted by former
19 occupants – and metaphorically, as a source and reminder of a certain “moral corruption”
20 within Abkhazian society. Disassociating themselves from the trophy house allowed my
21 interlocutors to maintain or restore a sense of moral integrity. However, this process was not
22 necessarily grounded in empathy for the “enemy.” As the article illustrates, even though the
23 displacement caused much distress, this distress appeared largely self-focused, with my
24 interlocutors being primarily concerned with the moral development of their own group rather
25 than the plight of the other.²⁹

26 In the post-war period, emotions and attitudes vis-à-vis the displaced were to some
27 extent mediated and re-negotiated through evolving intra-ethnic relations and issues of socio-
28 economic inequality. Once the immediate conflict was ended and the Georgians were largely
29 out of sight, actors on the ground became pre-occupied with their own socio-economic position
30 within a new, emerging order that was perceived as highly arbitrary. Consequently,
31 displacement did not simply “solve” the problem of peaceful co-habitation once and for all by
32 removing the adverse population. While the question of who owns the Abkhazian territory as
33 a whole united those fighting the Georgian enemy, the question of who should own the property
34 *within* that territory turned out to be decisively divisive.

1 The existence of different narratives and discourses thus reflects the multiple
2 experiences and degrees of victimization, loss and suffering that people in Abkhazia
3 experienced during and after the war, and the cycle of belief and doubt that they found
4 themselves in as a consequence; for despite their efforts to integrate the counter-discourse into
5 the larger narrative of victimhood, tensions were never fully resolved. And yet, rather than
6 merely reflecting these tensions, the counter-discourse also provided people with a resource to
7 cope with them. Not only did it lay the foundation for engagement across the conflict divide,
8 but also allowed actors to counter intra-group marginalization. Finally, the counter-discourse
9 also invoked a shared experience of hardship and alienation absent from official
10 representations. While causing embarrassment and despair, the laments around the trophy
11 houses had also become part of an intimate national repertoire and thus constitutive of
12 Abkhazia's post-war community. What this shows is that collective identities are not only
13 constituted by tales of war-time heroism and sacrifice.

14 The article therefore stresses the importance of studying countervailing narratives for
15 understanding post-war identities (and identities more generally). It also highlights the need to
16 study narratives not only as a window into past events and how they were experienced, but, by
17 paying attention to their functional, performative and contextual aspects, also for their own
18 sake. As I hope this paper illustrates, the prolonged, informal engagement with non-elite actors
19 through participant observation, although time-consuming, is particularly suited to achieving
20 these goals.

21
22
23
24

Notes

¹ The exact number of displaced people from Abkhazia is disputed (see ICG 2007, 18–19).

² The term “refugees,” which implies the crossing of state borders, is used in Abkhazia, whereas the Georgian government prefers the term “internally displaced persons,” which highlights Abkhazia’s status as an integral part of Georgia.

³ An exception is Paula Garb’s study of the role of blood revenge for the return of refugees (Garb 1995) as well as Gerard Toal and Magdalena Frichova Grono’s article on the Abkhazians’ attitudes towards return based on survey data (Toal and Grono 2011). Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck (2012) have touched upon the issue of how Abkhazians attribute blame but did not provide in-depth empirical evidence. Catherine Dale (1997) has written a very nuanced analysis of the dynamics of ethnic cleansing in the 1990s.

⁴ I use the terms “Abkhaz” (singular and plural) and “ethnic Abkhazian(s)” to refer to people of Abkhaz ethnicity. The term “Abkhazians” is used for residents of Abkhazia, regardless of ethnicity, as well as for de facto authorities and institutions.

⁵ Protracted, intractable conflicts are broadly understood as conflicts that are in stalemate (see Coleman 2014). While peace agreements do not automatically resolve all tension even in so-called “post-conflict” societies, their absence contributes to a particularly pervasive culture of conflict (see Bar-Tal 2013, 270–74).

⁶ Place names in Abkhazia are disputed between the two conflicting parties. Where there are different names for a place, I decided to use the one that was common before the war started. Consequently, I say “Sukhumi” instead

of “Sukhum,” as it is currently used in Abkhazia or the Georgian version “Sokhumi.” Exceptions are direct quotations where I have retained the original terms used by my interlocutors.

⁷ Because the research was conducted in Russian, I refer to original terms in Russian rather than Abkhaz. Most Abkhaz are fluent in Russian, which is still the dominant language in public affairs in Abkhazia.

⁸ After receiving initial support from civil society activists, I met most of my key informants by chance.

⁹ This is similar to what Malkki (1995, 50) observed among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, where “women seemed to be less accustomed and to feel less of an entitlement, to assume authorship of narrative expression.”

¹⁰ Given the sensitivity of the topic, the anonymity of my research participants takes first priority. Throughout the text, I will therefore provide only minimal personal information about my informants. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

¹¹ This section focuses on the events during the war. For a long-term account of the conflict, see, e.g., Kaufman (2001), Coppieters (2004), Zürcher (2007) and Hewitt (2013).

¹² Members of all nationalities became targets of looting and assault to some degree, including local Georgians.

¹³ An estimated 40,000 to 50,000 informally returned to the Gali district, which was predominantly Georgian before the war, in the mid-1990s (Amnesty International 2010, 11).

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the psychological mechanisms underlying collective (competitive) victimhood, see Noor et al. (2012).

¹⁵ The readiness to defend was heightened by a long history and culture of armed resistance, or what Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba (1999, 85) has called “the psychology of a warrior people.” As Abkhaz anthropologist Shalva Inal-Ipa (2010, 12) noted, due to a constant fear of being attacked, “Abkhazians never left home without weapons.”

¹⁶ It is a common argument in Abkhazia that a mass return of the displaced is likely to trigger renewed conflict.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the role of historians and historiography in the conflict, see Shnirelman (2001); Coppieters (2002); Kemoklidze (2016).

¹⁸ Mingrelians have been defined as a Georgian “sub-group” or “sub-ethnos” from the Samegrelo region adjacent to Abkhazia (see Broers 2012). A large proportion of the Georgians who lived in Abkhazia were Mingrelians.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the forced exile of the local Abkhaz population (known as *mukhajirstvo*), see Lakoba (1999). For an analysis of the resettlement of Mingrelians to Abkhazia under Stalin, see Blauvelt (2007).

²⁰ Both HRW (1995, 5) and the UN fact-finding mission (1993, para. 53) collected testimonies of numerous cases of inter-ethnic rescue.

²¹ According to Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck (2012), the displaced tend to attribute blame primarily to Russia.

²² Georgians were not the only victims of the illegal acquisition of their property. Many Russians who fled during the war and returned afterwards, also found their properties occupied but were often, but not always, able to reclaim it (see, e.g., Glebovski 2019).

²³ Toal and Frichova Grono (2011, 666) made a similar observation, noting that “[a] few Abkhaz analysts admit that issues of IDP property loom over the Abkhaz society, which will have to face them sooner or later.”

²⁴ Bryant (2014, 687) similarly observes that some Turkish Cypriots refused to loot because they feared that the objects could bring a curse.

²⁵ After the war, many ethnic Abkhazians, especially those from the eastern regions of Ochamchira and Tkvarcheli, moved westwards to areas that had been less dramatically affected by the war and/or were closer to urban settlements, such as Gagra and Sukhumi.

²⁶ See Vakhtang (2017) for comments on YouTube.

²⁷ Navaro-Yashin (2012, 156) observed a similar distinction between those who occupied Greek property out of need (e.g. refugees from the south who had lost their own property) and those who looted to acquire wealth among Turkish Cypriots.

²⁸ In fact, looting became such a pervasive feature of the post-war economy that it was almost impossible for anyone not to be implicated in one way or another.

²⁹ This resonates with research in social psychology that stresses the self-focused nature of collective guilt. For instance, according to Branscombe and Miron (2004, 329), collective guilt “reflects a selfish concern for one’s own pain rather than a sympathetic concern for the disadvantaged others.”

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