



**Regional Non-Governmental Organisation for the protection and development of
national culture and identity of the people of the Republic of North Ossetia and the
Republic of South Ossetia**

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GEORGIA: Ethnic Cleansing of Ossetians 1989-1992

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Introduction

As a result of the armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1989-1992, a huge part of the Ossetian population in South Ossetia and in Georgia, became refugees, or forcibly displaced people. Significant numbers were forced to resettle in North Ossetia, while the remainder dispersed in Tskhinval and the Ossetian villages of South Ossetia. Since then a plethora of government agencies and non-governmental organisations have wrestled with the refugee problem, but what they have achieved is incommensurate with the tragedy of the South Ossetians' exodus, regardless of the efforts being made. How will life unfold for them in future, in the places where they have found shelter? What stages must every refugee pass through? And who is responsible for the fact that within the space of one hour a person can lose all they have built up through years of hard work? that they can lose their native country and – most importantly – their status as a valued member of society, in some corner where they were pitched by circumstance?

The proliferation of extreme nationalism in Georgia at the end of the 1980s sheds light on all these questions -- when the Ossetian population fell victim to a policy of deifying all that was Georgian at the expense of ethnic minorities. In two years of conflict, about 115 thousand people ran for their lives across the border into North Ossetia, abandoning their homes, their way of life and plans for the future, and their long attachment to land in which their ancestors were buried. Historical memory told them that only escape could save them from neighbours who seemed to have succumbed to a sudden sickness. People began recalling the events of the distant 1920s, forgotten over years of Soviet 'internationalism and friendship of the peoples', when the Georgian Mensheviks torched huge numbers of South Ossetian villages to the ground, even more cruelly.

Ossetia became part of the Russian empire in 1774 and, a quarter of a century later, Georgia also joined, in 1801. There were no "Samachablo"¹ and "Shida Kartli" when the Georgian feudal neighbours staked a claim to Ossetian territory, and the Russian government's response in 1830 was final and unequivocal: the Georgians had no rights to South Ossetia.

In 1918 Georgia declared its independence from Russia, and South Ossetia found itself in a dangerous situation. Then, as in 1989, South Ossetia opted for Russian patronage which explains its Bolshevik orientation: it was only within Russia that it could achieve unification with North Ossetia. As in 1989, South Ossetia became a lever by which Russia could apply pressure on Georgian separatists, and the Menshevik Georgian leadership was far less ready to seek peaceful settlement with the South Ossetians than Georgian leaders today. After Soviet rule was declared in South Ossetia in 1920, Georgian Menshevik leaders launched the whole of their regular army against it. Tens of thousands of people were driven out of their homes; villages were reduced to ash; thousands of civilians were murdered; and more than 5,000 died of cold, starvation, typhus and tuberculosis, as they tried to flee over the mountain pass into North Ossetia. Over 3,000 peasant farmsteads were torched. Once Soviet rule had been established in Georgia, a government commission was set up to assess the gross material damage suffered by Soviet Ossetia during this punitive Georgian raid. In financial terms this was the gold equivalent of 3,317,516 roubles. Thousands of displaced people settled in North Ossetia.

"Ossetia must have the government that it wants" Chicherin, the RSFSR People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs said in a note to the Georgian Menshevik authorities about the South Ossetian events. Alas, this was not a question of genocide against a people who were striving to join Russia. "The government that Ossetia wants" meant the government that Russia wanted, supported by a people loyal to Russia, whatever its regime. After Soviet rule was established in Georgia, South

¹ 'Samachablo' were the lands of the Georgian Machabeli Princes. "Shida Kartli" was "the Georgian Hinterland"). Georgian nationalists used both these terms in the late 20th century to assert Georgian claims over South Ossetian territory – trans.

Ossetia was artificially and unwillingly handed over to it - to the same Georgia that two years earlier had exterminated Ossetians under the slogan "There are Ossetians in Georgia, but no Ossetia!". In 1922 a South Ossetian Autonomous Region was set up within Georgia, and North Ossetia was left inside the RSFSR. Ossetia was split into two autonomous regions inside two federated Republics of the USSR. The ground had been laid for the next genocide.

PART I: SIXTY EIGHT YEARS LATER...

Nietzsche said that the Vikings were the product of the north wind. Possibly decades of resistance to the assimilationist policies of the Georgian leadership have nurtured a sort of South Ossetian resistance to being assimilated into an alien milieu. The thought of uniting with North Ossetia never left the South Ossetians, even though the Soviet authorities cruelly punished "subversive" demands of this type. Representatives of South and North Ossetia twice brought this proposal before Stalin in 1925, and he responded harshly – in the final tally, members of the delegation were shot dead. Nevertheless, South Ossetians continued to float the idea of uniting with North Ossetia more than once, in the 1940s during the Second World War, and during the Khrushchev's 'Thaw' in the 1950s and 60s. But the Ossetians were not in a position to alter the hierarchical system that subordinated one minority ethnic group to another. This reference to the hierarchical structure of the Soviet state was key to the speeches of Alan Chochiev, leader of "Adæmon Nykhas" – the South Ossetian Popular Front - that arose in Tskhinval in 1988, after Georgia had announced its intention to leave the USSR. The federal Centre delegated a limited number of rights to ethnic minorities, depending on their numerical size within the USSR. This consigned small ethnic groups to a never-ending role as 'little brother', which had a direct bearing on their standard of living, both economic and cultural. The population of South Ossetia shrank: more people migrated and fewer were born. From 107 thousand in pre-war years, the population shrank to 98 thousand in 1989, and as it did, the percentage of Ossetians in the overall Georgian population fell and the proportion of Georgians rose. The standard of living in the autonomous region was 2-2.5 times lower than the republican average.

Data supplied in a "History of Ossetian-Georgian Relations" published in Tskhinval in 1995² show that the South Ossetian Autonomous Region was as an appendix to Georgia for agrarian raw materials. Miserly resources were devoted to the industrial development of the South Ossetian Republic. In 1947, the federal USSR authorities decided to transport reparations equipment from Vienna to Tskhinval for a machine repair plant. In 1948 the plant was producing solid profits for the regional economy, and meeting planned output targets by 315% (!) – but in 1950 it was relocated west to Kutaisi, outside the South Ossetian region. In separate years, on separate pretexts, sawmills in Dzhalabet and Churiskhev were closed down and oil exploration in Grom was abandoned. The USSR Council of Ministers issued a decision to build a meat-processing plant and a bread factory in the region, but the implementation was stretched over ten years, while similar factories were being built in Georgia in the space of only one. There was a similar policy in the farming sector, where the Soviet Georgian leadership drew up a harvesting plan that in square acreage exceeded the size of areas sown. Collective farms were obliged to till private village pasture to fulfil the plan. A shortage of feed led to a fall in the number of cattle, and many areas with a rich stock-breeding tradition became devoid of animals. They had to buy stock unofficially in order to meet targets for the production of beef and veal. Mountain districts of South Ossetia that had never supported grain were given cereal-harvesting targets. There is no need to describe the shortcomings of Soviet economic planning here, but in Georgian districts adjoining South Ossetia completely realistic agricultural targets were set, that were some 3-4 times lower. Economic discrimination against the peasantry led to the impoverishment of the rural population and total ruin of the region's agricultural sector.

² By well-known South Ossetian historians Yu.S Gagloyty, M.K.Dzhiyoyev, N.G.Dzhusoyty, K.P. Pukhaev, B.V.Tekhov and L.A. Chibirov

The same policy pertained towards South Ossetian culture. In 1938 the Ossetic alphabet was converted to Georgian. From 1949 onwards the whole educational system from primary school onwards, went over to the Georgian language. In schools in Dzau district, where absolutely no Georgians lived and almost no one knew the Georgian language, children could not complete their schooling and remained illiterate. In 1951, all business and government in the region went over to the Georgian language, and in the space of one day, all signs in Ossetic were removed from the walls of buildings. The district newspaper in Leningor district came out only in Georgian, even though more than 70% of its readers were Ossetian.

In 1989 the new Georgia announced it would leave the USSR and introduced the very same measures -- which provoked open opposition from the Ossetian population of South Ossetia. Everything came back – the Georgian language, and the business and government dealings: everything that Soviet Georgia had used for so long in its efforts to exterminate the Ossetian population, and with it, the reason for a South Ossetian autonomous region in their midst.

Of course people protested against the Georgian authorities' anti-Ossetian policies back in the 1950s too. Representatives of the South Ossetian intelligentsia and students were sentenced to various terms of hard labour for their pains.

At least the existence of the Soviet Union was a guarantee against physical extinction for the Ossetian people.

At the end of the 1980s the Soviet Union was no longer able to guarantee anything quite so confidently. Or, truer to say, it was simply trying to keep its head above water just a little longer. A "catwalk of sovereign states" had begun. Radical politicians in Georgia knew of the committed pro-Soviet orientation in their autonomous regions³ and very easily identified a platform from which to combat it – this was nationalism, which was at the same time a good springboard for bouncing themselves into power. From 1988 onwards a nationalistic psychosis took a grip of Georgia, that led to an outburst of ethnic violence. The slogan "Georgia – for the Georgians!" - a close cousin of "Deutschland über alles!" -- was adopted by all Georgian political parties and movements, to a greater or lesser extent. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the leader of the Helsinki Union (significantly never a part of the authoritative International Helsinki Federation) very quickly became new Georgia's favourite son. Even those ethnic minorities who had never experienced outright discrimination, felt insecure, waiting for their turn to come.

The media unleashed a campaign against ethnic minorities, painting them as a threat to the well-being of the Georgian people. The effrontery of their nationalism was shocking, as was its cynicism and aggression. There was no longer talk of programmes to nurture the development of the Georgian nation. Now there were calls to "sweep away the ethnic minority rubbish" and "to restrict their birth rate" etc. According to the new theories, Russians suffered from intrinsic "biological defects, such as drunkenness and cannibalism"; Azeris "reproduced too fast"; Meskhetian Turks were aliens who belonged back in Turkey; and the Abkhaz were "a tribe that had come down from the mountains in the last century". Georgia devised a 'percentage norm' of non-Georgians who could reside on Georgian territory.

These facts are all well-known and well-documented, and we have no desire to rehearse them here. Public figures in Georgia of relatively progressive views have by now already condemned these displays of fascism and even admitted they were wrong. But they did so only after they realised that unless they admitted the "excesses" of the recent past, an independent Georgia would never acquire

³ Abkhazia, Adjara, South Ossetia – trans.

a reputation for decency, or achieve formal and official admission to European structures – though even so, it enjoys the West's full indulgence. And back then the nationalists could count on almost unanimous support from a Georgian people, ready to do battle with any apologists for the Soviet regime that had massacred peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia began actively organising demonstrations back in 1989, introducing himself and his objectives to the public, the result of which would be the glorification of Georgia. His first public appearances were not always a success. People did not know what the Helsinki Union was, and back then Georgians were not yet used to jacking in their work and going off to a demonstration mid-day. At the early demonstrations you would hear people saying: "That man's toxic, he's pure poison! Where the hell did he come from? Steer clear folks!" But if they heckled, his followers would promise to remember and get even with them. Then later, people got swept along with him and began to give him their support, convinced he was their Messiah. "I tell you once again. Georgians buy their wives expensive clothes and jewellery, but Ossetians buy weapons for the morrow".

According to Zviad, South Ossetians were buying arms in North Ossetia with Russian money and transporting them south, not through the Roki tunnel, but by mountain paths on horseback. At a demonstration in November 1989 in Gori, Stalin's birthplace, two young chaps pushed their way through the crowd as if on cue, whispered something to him, and Gamsakhurdia announced he had just learned that "Ossetians were planning an attack on Gori that night", and so he urged people to form detachments to defend the Tskhinval road. He finished his speech with the following inspiration to Gori residents: "Long live the new Stalin of Georgia!" That night no one attacked Gori and its residents cursed Zviad good and proper, but the vision of Georgian nationalist supremacy was always at play, and left an unmistakable imprint on their souls.

South Ossetia also saw protest meetings, against the new law on Georgian as the state language, on the necessity to conduct all public affairs in it and against the introduction of a compulsory Georgian-language proficiency exam for students going on to higher education. The South Ossetian leadership tried to contain the situation, maintain stability and promise a solution to all these problems – but without Moscow's support there was no reason to think these promises would be met. And Moscow was doing nothing after 9 April 1989, when it sent in Soviet armoured vehicles to crush Tbilisi residents demonstrating in Rustaveli Avenue.

Meanwhile, New Georgia's anti-Ossetian campaign reached a new intensity. Nationalist leaders succeeded in projecting a consistent image of Ossetians as the 'enemy'. The Societies of Ivan Machabeli and St Ilia the Just did sterling work to convince the public that priority number one was to abolish Georgia's autonomous regions in Georgia, close the Roki Tunnel and expel the Ossetians. Emissaries of Georgian societies and movements also called in on Checheno-Ingushetia to attend anti-Ossetian get-togethers of the Ingush, counting on their help and promising them support. In Georgia a nationwide signature-drive began for the abolition of South Ossetian autonomy – though the signatures proved completely redundant when the decision later came to abolish it. The war preparations of that time peaked with the famous march into South Ossetia on 23 November 1989. At previous meetings in Gori and Eredvi, Gamsakhurdia had promised to bring 200 thousand Georgians to the centre of Tskhinval for a demonstration. He did not manage to raise that number, even though the demonstrators were brought in from all over Georgia, but there were definitely about 40 thousand in the procession, that is certain. Many were armed. Any drivers who refused to take them into Tskhinval were simply ejected from their cars by 'patriots' who took over the wheel and drove off in the direction of Tskhinval, euphorically brandishing scarlet flags.

Next day on 24 November at 4.00pm, an eye witness says the crowd gathered in front of Gori city soviet, awaiting news from Tskhinval, where almost all the city's young folk had gone. Some who got back said that all the Tskhinval party were safe and well, and that Mr Gamsakhurdia would be in Gori any minute to tell them all about it. While they waited, someone pelted Stalin's huge statue with eggs

for having given the Ossetians an autonomous region. Gamskhurdia looked grim when he appeared, and said angrily "My dear fellow Georgians wanted to hold a peaceful demonstration in Tskhinvali. But they were unable to carry out their plan. Why? Because Ossetian women put children in front of them, with their menfolk standing behind, with interlinked arms. True they were not armed. But behind them were Russian troops in armoured vehicles. Ossetian guys were also standing on the backs of lorries, clutching big portraits of the blood-sucker Lenin, and some holding their tricolour flag." Many people started asking him what colour the tricolour was? He said "Ask the guys who were there." The 'guys' said "It looked like a woman's apron" – and everyone fell about laughing.

The more Zviad Gamsakhurdia spoke about the march on Tskhinval, that had been blocked by unarmed men, the more angry he got. "Get rid of Ossetians in responsible positions - police and teachers first. I authorise you to search their homes and confiscate any weapons, daggers, big knives or axes you find. There will be an end to South Ossetia, and we shall close the Roki Tunnel!" At that point Zviad suddenly began stamping his feet and gesturing. His words were unintelligible, because his mouth sometimes locked open and he could not close his jaw. The crowd began to mutter "Zviad has flipped his lid." "We should tie him up like a nutter." "Of course he's stamping his feet. He went to South Ossetia with teeth and came back with gums." "He went to South Ossetia on wings, and came back with them clipped" etc. They didn't dare say any of this out loud, because they were afraid of him, and they also felt sorry for him – because he was very tired.⁴

The great Leader's call was heard. He had considered himself the nation's Leader for a long time now already. "Within a short while I became the Leader of the Georgian people and they would swear oaths by my name. Listen to them calling "Zviad! Zviad!" From now on there was mass discrimination against Ossetians, expressed in even more unexpected forms. It became common for Ossetians to be asked to change their nationality, and Georgianise their surnames: for example, for Abaytæ to become Abashidze; Khetægkatæ – Khetagrui; and Dzaparatæ - Dzhaparidze. One Ossetian who had been forced to change his nationality submitted an official inquiry to the Academician Dzaukhishvili Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Georgian Academy of Sciences - and even got an answer. It said "Mr Khachirashvili has requested us to investigate the history, origin and national attribution of his surname. In reply we can tell him that the Khachirashvilis came from Inner Kartli (the territory of Central Georgia - author), where there is a village called Khachiraantkari. They went from there to settle in the Mejuda ravine. Bearers of this Georgian surname belong to the Ossetian nation. All Khachirashvilis are Georgian in origin, but in olden times their surname was - Khachiuri. In the 19th century census, the Khachirashvili surname began to be considered Ossetian." The letter was signed by the Director of the Institute, Academician G. Melikishvili.

By the time this requirement was articulated openly, a huge number of Ossetians already had surnames that were Ossetian but included the Georgian "shvili" suffix, particularly in the districts of Kareli and Gori, and in Kakheti. Many had changed their nationality to Georgian during long years of residence there. And so in the villages of Dusheti district, Driaevs became Meladzes and Kisievs were known as Archvadzes.

In mid-1990 the Executive Committee of the Khashuri district Soviet of People's Deputies in Georgia decided that Ossetian and Armenian surnames should be amended, attaching a list of the names and citing "historical and archival sources". It went on to say that in their ID documents, 'Georgian' should be given as their nationality. And so, the surname Kulumbegovy became Kulumbegshvili; Mikoyan – Mikashvili etc. On request, Tskhovrebashvili was "converted back" to Tskhovrebuli and Shaverdyan to Shaverdashvili.

⁴ "Zviad Gamsakhurdia the Blood Thirsty" Volumes I-III, compiled by A. Margiev

After the declaration of a Republic of South Ossetia on 20 September 1990, even Georgians who were not previously nationalist joined the anti-Ossetian movement. The leader of the Georgian Nationalist Opposition Movement Merab Kostava, died in unexplained circumstances in 1990 and the great “Leader” took control of his bloc: the “Round Table – for a Free Georgia”.

The ground for abolishing Ossetian autonomy was prepared not just by the media and in street demonstrations. The leaderships in Tbilisi had embarked even earlier on a step-by-step liquidation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, by eliminating its basis in law first of all. All Soviet legislation was abolished, including the Union Treaty that awarded South Ossetia autonomy within a hostile republic. The “Round Table” that had come to power intended to institute a system of regional Prefects, appointed from Tbilisi. In August 1990 the Ossetian leadership twice asked Tbilisi for permission to hold elections to its Regional Soviet, whose mandate had expired in March. The answer was a blank refusal, which they rightly interpreted as virtual abolition of their autonomy: Georgia had only to phrase the decision in legal language. Subsequent events followed with inexorable logic.

On 20 September 1990 came a Declaration of Sovereignty and of a South-Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic within the USSR;

On 28 October 1990 The “Round Table – for a Free Georgia” bloc won a victory in the elections for the Supreme Soviet of Georgia and Zviad Gamsakhurdia became Chairman of Parliament;

On 9 December 1990, there were elections to the Supreme Soviet of the South Ossetian Soviet Democratic Republic and Torez Kulumbegov was elected president;

On 11 December 1990, the Georgian Parliament adopted a Law On the Abolition of South Ossetian Autonomy;

On 12 December 1990 a State of Emergency was introduced in the Tskhinval and Dzau districts by Georgian militia forces and subdivisions of the UUSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. That same day, General Kvantaliani was declared “City Commandant” of Tskhinval;

On 5 January 1991, the Kremlin sanctioned the deployment of 3,000 Georgian militiamen in Tskhinval (a decision taken by USSR Interior Minister Boris Pugo, and sanctioned by Mikhail Gorbachev).

On the night of 5-6 January 1991, General Malyushkin gave the order to withdraw the subdivisions of USSR Internal Troops and open the road to Tskhinval.

The city slept through the start of the war. But still, it was an entire city and filled with people. Part of its Georgian population left Tskhinval on the eve of the fighting, aware of the imminent attack. Many of them had even resigned from work, and collected their employment books. But many stayed, unwilling to believe that all this was real or would last a long time. They were not at war with their own people, or with the Ossetians, but people in Georgia immediately branded them as traitors. Before they left, many of them warned their neighbours honestly about the invasion that was being planned, and some decided not to leave at all. During those two years of war, 719 Georgians and 340 Georgian-speaking Armenians stayed behind in Tskhinval.

The threat that erupted on Orthodox Christmas eve united the entire Ossetian population of the city. The men grouped themselves in detachments, manned barricades, and set up a line of defense. They were as one, and despite their acute lack of weaponry, they were able to do something, and offer some resistance. But Ossetians living in the villages of South Ossetia, near and far, were in a different position. They were forced to rely on their menfolk, most of whom had no weapons. Many made their way to the city to support their own side in fighting inside the city. The villages were left open to armed groups that very quickly broke away from the local Georgian population. The total lawlessness inspired them to any manner of crimes. Bandits attacked villages, pillaged houses and set them afire, then withdrew in anticipation of the arrival of Ossetian detachments or subdivisions of Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs.

It was far harder for Ossetians living in Georgia's hinterland – in the districts of Kareli, Gori, Kaspi, Borjomi, Akhmeta and other parts where Ossetians lived on Georgian territory and had no means of protection. What could they do? Zviad Gamsakhurdia gave a simple and cynical answer to a journalist from the Italian newspaper "La Stampa", when he said: "So, you think that they should get out? Obviously. There is no other solution. Either that, or they can sit tight and be no trouble to anyone". Around 100 thousand Ossetians were living on Georgian territory at that point.

But even Ossetians who had no connection to events in Tskhinval, and 'sat tight' in Georgia, had no guarantee against expulsion. Observing what was going on, they felt increasingly like temporary tenants on Georgian territory. Only those who managed to change their surname and nationality in time, or those who swapped sides and swore allegiance to the avengers' camp, could count on immunity for their families – and then not always. Here is an example of the lack of ceremony with which local leaders replaced the Code of Labour Laws and took upon themselves the role of judges, deciding "whom to punish and whom to pardon".

"Order No 4

On the dismissal of history teacher Ivan Semyonovich Gagloyev from Zghuderi Middle School, Kareli district, 23 January 1991.

From 9-10 January 1991, I.S. Gagloyev volunteered to collect signatures for an appeal to the USSR President, in defiance of the just decision of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian Republic to liquidate the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and spoke in support of a Decree of the USSR President dated 7 January 1991, which sows enmity between fraternal peoples. The conclusion is: that history teacher Ivan Semyonovich Gagloyev opposes the Georgian people and other peoples living on Georgian territory and from 17 January 1991 will be dismissed from his post. Agreed by Minute 1 of a Trade Union meeting dated 22 January 1991. Signed: Director of Zghuderi Middle School, A. Dzhabishvili."

Director Dzhabishvili evidently once bore the Ossetian surname Dzhabiev. It is not hard to imagine that he would not blend into the background for too long, but soon be exposed by representatives of the 'trueblood' nation.

That is what happened to the Gabaraev family from Kareli. Nikolay Samsonovich Gabaraev worked in the Kareli transport department and his wife, Zoya Sergeevna Kodalaeva, was a mathematics teacher in Kareli Middle School No 1. They were both sacked from work in 1991 on account of their "Ossetian" nationality. She received this notification: "Remove teacher Z.S.Kodalaeva from her post from 4 March 1991 because of her Ossetian nationality and her Ossetian family name, pursuant to Minute No 1 of a meeting of teachers' and technical personnel at Kareli Middle School No 1, 4 March 1991. Signed: the Director of Kareli Middle School No 1, F. Svanidze. Order No 111 of 5 March 1991. "Nikolay Gabaraev's brother Otar was also dismissed from his work with the Gori Police Department. Signed: "Khurzarin", 31 May 2003. (Style of the original preserved).

No matter how far the villagers of Tskhinval and Znaur districts kept their heads down, the first South Ossetian refugees outside the building of the Tskhinval City Soviet in January 1991 were from there. A Commission on Refugees was set up within the Headquarters to coordinate events during the State of Emergency. Obviously, there was no experience of working with refugees in South Ossetia at that time, or in the Soviet Union as a whole. Refugees wrote their first appeals to the Commission in groups. For example, the residents of Ioncha in Znaur district of South Ossetia reported that they had been attacked by Georgian bandits, beaten up and forced out of their homes, and were now requesting help. And they signed their names in columns. At that time there was no special form for refugees to complete; they made up the text themselves, listing all they had been forced to suffer in touching detail. But almost every appeal contained the same core elements:

- their houses had been shot up;
- they had been humiliated and beaten, and shots had been fired in the air around them;
- they had been plundered and their money had been stolen;
- people had been taken hostage;
- they had been expelled and forced to leave their homes;
- they had climbed out of a window and fled into the forest or fields;
- they were living in cramped conditions with relatives;
- they were asking for food and somewhere to live

Story No 1. Neighbours



Fenya Kokoyeva lives to this day with her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the "Ossetia" tourist centre. Before the war she lived in the settlement of Kurta in Tskhinval district. She says: "I used to work as a cook right here, in the tourist resort, and travelled to work by bus. I was very friendly with my neighbours in Kurta, but later saw that everyone who broke into our house was a neighbour. Every time it happened we thought that when morning came we would definitely leave for Tskhinval, but morning would bring the hope that it was all over and we would again decide to stay. On the night the village learned we were preparing to flee, they stole everything they could carry. Next morning we fled. Some of our neighbours tried to persuade us to stay - my husband's name is Kochiev, but he goes by the name of Kochishvili in his passport and they thought he was a Georgian – but we did not listen to them. They had even divided up our property between them. I only managed to get 100 roubles for one cow, and they soon razed the house to the ground. We reached Tskhinval on foot and made straight for this tourist centre, because I had nowhere else to go. My husband totally lost his grip, and was in a state of shock, unable to say a word. Russian troops were billeted in the resort centre just then, but I managed to wangle a room. We spent the whole war here, under rounds of gunfire: the Georgians knew the centre was full of troops and regularly subjected the building to intense fire. A few years after the war my husband died of a stroke. He was never himself after we fled, and all these years he just sat on the balcony and said nothing.

I lost my documents so was never able to arrange a pension in

North Ossetia. We live on nothing. Back in Kurta I left behind a two-storey house, eight cows, 18 sheep and 14 sets of bedding – but now we sleep in mattresses from the kindergarten. The children go to school in the orphanage.

These days my old neighbours sometimes invite me to funerals or some other goings-on in the village, and usually ask me to bake some bread or pies for the occasion. But I don't want to see any of them again, though I lived there for 32 years. Occasionally I meet some of the men from Kurta selling fruit outside the main supermarket. They call over to me and wave, and offer me apples. But I do not look and try to get away fast, as though I was the one ashamed to look them in the eye."

There came a moment when the Georgian hinterland needed a formal reason for getting rid of Ossetians. Every refugee remembers questionnaires and lists, signature-drives and demonstrations calling for "Tskhinval separatists" to be punished. A so-called questionnaire that the media say was compiled in the Georgian parliament was distributed around firms, organisations and agencies in Georgia where Ossetians still worked, and tossed into the letter boxes of houses and flats where they lived. It said: "The Soviet regime created a South Ossetian Autonomous Region in Georgia when they annexed it in 1921, so that when the need arose, they could trigger bloodshed between brothers – between Georgians and Ossetians. Today's conflict in Shida Kartli (as Georgians took to calling the area including the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region) is testimony to this. Therefore, we Ossetians resident in Georgia, support the Georgian Supreme Soviet's decision to abolish the South Ossetian Autonomous Region and demand:

1. The withdrawal of Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs from this region
2. The disarming of Ossetian extremists
3. and the creation of a representative Commission on the processes going on in Shida Kartli.

Every Ossetian in Georgia had to sign the form, and give their surname, Christian name, and exact address. Ossetians called the questionnaire the "squeeze". Many signed it thinking it was a formality that might save them from mayhem and murder. Others refused to sign, arguing that the Soviet state had given them an Autonomous Region, and so the Soviet state must take it away. Others were frightened of being seen as traitors to the Ossetian people. One way or another, these accursed "questionnaires" are connected with many tragedies for the Ossetian population in Georgia.

Story No 2. Signatures.



Zaira Mikhailovna Kabulova-Chibirova comes from Agara village in Kareli district of Georgia, and now lives in Vladikavkaz in the republic of North Ossetia. She says that "in Agara 50% of the population were Ossetians. They all visited Znaur frequently, where most of them had relatives. Our whole life in Agara was somehow bound up with the sugar factory. We had a large 2-storey house, and a car, and a three-roomed flat besides. We also had a dacha in the village of Keleti in Khashuri district. My sons were back from their military service and my daughter had a husband in Znaur (the centre of Znaur district, in South Ossetia, which adjoins the Kareli district of Georgia). We all speak pure Georgian and our children went to Georgian schools.

Everything began with a signature drive among Ossetians for the closure of the Roki tunnel through to Russia and the abolition of South Ossetian Autonomy. We were already frightened of going to Znaur, because they used to make Ossetians stand on the bus and the route was picketed. People started coming to the house in the middle of the night, carrying out searches and asking for money. One of our sons, Zaur, lived in Tbilisi. The other son, David, always used to go into hiding somewhere every night. I asked him to sign the wretched petition just in case, and told him it was a piece of nonsense, and that all these lists were just a formality. But when they came round to see him, he still refused to sign. The Georgians had an HQ in the Agara Culture Centre, where various women were always hanging about, spreading rumours. It was they who passed on that Kabulov had refused to sign the petition. That night (a night when he happened to be at home) some people he knew - Ossetians - came round and asked him to come outside. He went out, they put him in a car and drove him off. We were frightened to go looking for him, but frightened not to as well. We feared the worst. Georgians found his body in the river three days later, with six bullets in it. That same night, straight after the funeral, our house was riddled with gunfire.

My husband and I fled to North Ossetia. Through people we knew our daughter managed to get 3,700 roubles for the sale of our house, but we just abandoned our flat and the dacha. Our other son soon joined us in North Ossetia from Tbilisi. His Georgian wife was not keen to come with him, but he was constantly under threat. To begin with we lived with relatives in Nart village, then later we all worked out on the fields of the state farm and got a wagon to live in. Actually it was a big oblong cistern and we lived in it for 7 years before we could earn enough through market trading, to buy a tiny flat in a communal yard. Our grandson Zurab lives with us, the son of my boy David who was killed. And Zaur married a girl from North Ossetia. They now have two children and have called the boy David. Thank God we are no longer refugees."

The Kremlin calculated that Georgia would get caught up in this war, then later be forced to renounce its separatist policy and sign the Union Treaty, and in part this is what started to happen. The West could not give recognition to a country that was blatantly fascist. Globally, prominent human rights activists condemned the actions of the Georgian regime, and stressed that the activity of Gamsakhurdia's alliance contradicted international human rights standards encapsulated in the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords. And right-thinking people in Georgia condemned the repression of the Ossetians. In an article in Moscow News on 16 September 1990, the Georgian philosopher M Mamardashvili asked: "How can someone who ascribes to the Helsinki movement have no idea what human rights are? This is sheer ignorance: moral colour blindness. If we say nothing openly about this, then very soon a great misfortune will visit Georgia. According to sociological research, the overwhelming majority of Georgians want to elect Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their President. And if that happens, I will need to go against my own people."

One refugee's story testifies to the fact that not everyone was in thrall to Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationality policy, by any means.

Liza Taraeva-Kochieva is a refugee from Rustavi, now living in the Zavodskoy suburb of the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz. She says: "My parents lived in Kakhetli in the village of Jugaani, Telavi district, or "Dzugaevy", in Ossetic, where in December every year people usually celebrate "Stalinoba" - a day to honour Josef Stalin. My husband and I lived in Rustavi. Once I was driving over to my parents in 1990 when I unexpectedly came across Zviad Gamsakhurdia in his car en route. I learned he had arranged a meeting with the residents of Akhmeta, at which he planned to call for all Ossetians to be wiped out of the territory. But the head of the district Administration barred him from the town and even the surrounding district. Gamsakhurdia came back via Telavi, but found the road there closed and so had to drive through our little Jugaani village. Maybe he thought that one day they would celebrate a "Zviadoba" in honour of him? I don't know. By now I even feel a bit sorry for him. We lost our old house in Jugaani and my parents died in North Ossetia.

The whole of January 1991, Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs carried on patrolling the streets and protecting the "Ossetia" tourist centre, without intervening on behalf of either party to the conflict. The soldiers claimed that if they left for a day, the Ossetians could free the town of its Georgian police presence: whenever armoured vehicles appeared, all firing stopped. General Malyushkin admitted that his troops could use force only if massive bloodshed threatened. It came to the point that the leader of the informal Georgian armed "Mkhedrioni" group, Dzhaba Ioseliani, proposed that Georgian militiamen be withdrawn from the conflict zone, Internal Troops of the USSR Interior Ministry confined to barracks and peace would be kept by units of the "Mkhedrioni", which he thought enjoyed great authority among the Ossetian population.

Possibly the fact that the 'punitive' 8th Regiment of Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs was at that time deployed in Tskhinval explains a lot – the regiment that had played an unseemly role in the armed suppression of a popular uprising in Vladikavkaz in 1981 during a flare-up of the conflict between Ossetia and Ingushetia. The families of its officers lived in Tbilisi and so they could not afford to demonstrate a partisan position in the armed conflict.

All these things really did confirm the suspicion that Moscow was deliberately not getting involved. The more the blood flowed in South Ossetia, the more the Kremlin became displeased with the Georgian leadership's separatist policy. Little by little, the Centre was bound to be nudged towards intervention, and resolving the conflict through Soviet force of arms; freshening up Georgia's political image and returning prodigal Georgia to its Soviet home. The only thing no one knew was how much blood would need to be spilled before the conflict was finally recognised as a bloody war, and the last Ossetians were saved from extinction. Torez Kulumbegov, Chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of South Ossetia, entertained the possibility of a trade-off between the Kremlin and Georgia: if it was given a free hand over its autonomous regions, Georgia could be pressured into signing the Union Treaty. His subsequent kidnap from the self-same doomed "Ossetia" tourist centre, mysteriously while he was meeting the Georgian leadership in the presence of Soviet Generals, does suggest that Moscow was not averse to removing an Ossetian leader "just in case" it made it easier for Georgia to sort out its autonomous region.

President Gorbachev was busy trying to sort out the conflict in the Persian Gulf and Saddam Hussein's personal representative, Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Tariq Aziz, came to Moscow. Gorbachev proposed a concrete plan of action to contain the conflict, which was a "very detailed, precise and well thought-out political solution to the problem". The media reported that Tariq Aziz instantly left for Iraq, without wasting a moment, and that he was even offered a special aeroplane to Teheran? But this incisive President could not find the few moments necessary to sign a Decree for a State of Emergency throughout South Ossetia, where Georgian armed gangs ruled.

On 11 February 1991, Deputies of the Vladikavkaz Soviet of People's Deputies in North Ossetia sent an Open Letter to the USSR President, saying that the "Situation in South Ossetia has gone beyond a local inter-ethnic conflict and now resembles genocide against the Ossetian people".

“...The whole world is prepared to protest against a far smaller tragedy in the Baltic states, and regards this effort to deprive a whole people of the right to exist as a third-rate mishap “somewhere in the East”. Gamsakhurdia could have suggested that all the peoples inhabiting his republic could become independent along with the Georgians. Instead, he demands that they leave their homes and their land, and re-settle somewhere in the USSR (i.e. transform themselves into hundreds and thousands of refugees. More than this, Ossetians are being forced out of their own property, by means of terror, starvation, murder, kidnap, arson and confiscation...Moscow has troops in the region but they are under orders to remain neutral. Previous negative experiences have evidently made President Gorbachev cautious about introducing presidential rule here. In the Caucasus it could ignite a prolonged and bloody war in Georgia. But one thing is clear: if the new Union Treaty offers no effective security guarantees for ethnic minorities, the Ossetian tragedy will be an overture to new pogroms and violence”. So wrote the Bonn newspaper “General - Anzeiger” in issue No. 13, 1991.

Georgia was in no mind to sign the Union Treaty. The nationalist position was even stronger after the Georgian independence referendum of 31 March, in which the populace had of course unanimously opted to leave the USSR. South Ossetia took no part in the referendum, but the impact was the same as if it had: in either case the outcome was what would suit Georgia.

South Ossetia on the other hand voted on 17 March 1991 to preserve the Soviet Union, still believing there was a chance Moscow could save the Ossetians from annihilation. The referendum was conducted under heavy gunfire, but everyone turned out to vote, even the oldest veterans who were still sending appeals to Moscow and Soviet Defence Minister, Dmitry Yazov, along the lines of: “...Our ancestors were true and faithful servants of Russia. They won glory for themselves against Napoleon on the battlefields of 1812; in the Russian-Turkish wars of the 1870s; the war between Russia and Japan in 1905; the First World War and other military campaigns of the Russian Empire...South Ossetia is the one place in the Caucasus where the call to arms is not heard”.

In mid-April L. Kelekhsaeva, the Deputy Head Doctor of the South Ossetian Republican Hospital told journalists that the hospital had treated 289 wounded since 5 January, of whom 39 had died of their injuries: 19 of them children under the age of 17.

But the time for intervention had still not come, and the blood continued to flow...

Story No 3. How much blood?

Anna Sadulovna Kortieva is a refugee from Kareli in Georgia, now living in the Zavodskoy district of the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz. According to her: "They say that 6 Georgians were killed in Tskhinval at that time, and as a result everyone simply went mad. I asked for bread at the bakers', but they wouldn't give me any and just said "Get lost. Tonight we are going to kill all the Ossetians". I sent my children away that same day to my relatives in Sachkhere settlement, not far from Kareli, and stayed behind with my husband to get everything ready for off and to try to sell at least some of our smallest livestock. But two days later my children were back – they didn't want to stay in Sachkhere. So that night the whole family secretly took the train to Sochi, concealing ourselves among the Azeri passengers and keeping our mouths shut till we reached Sukhum. And it was only then that very many of the people travelling with us began speaking in Ossetic. They were villagers fleeing from Apnisi and Leteti in Khashuri district. My husband went back to Kareli after a while in an effort to sell the house. He was there at exactly the time that Georgians attacked the Ossetian village of Tsinagar [in the Leningor district of South Ossetia – author], and murdered 7 Ossetians, with 3 Georgian fatalities. This was cause for a new round of barbarity, in Kareli too. The Georgians

who broke into our house that night were up in arms that my husband was daring to sell the house, because wasn't it enough that they were allowing him to escape with his life? One of them said: 'I'm sick of killing Ossetians and throwing them in the river. I haven't seen my Mum for three months'. They wouldn't let us sell our house. They beat my husband black and blue but they let him go in one piece."

As for 'throwing them in the river' – unfortunately that was not an elderly woman's flight of fantasy. They really did throw dead Ossetians into the nearest stretch of water, and the River Kura became their biggest underwater grave. An eye witness even claimed that local residents gave up fishing at that time: it was anglers who would periodically land corpses, and everyone had heard about them. If anyone was ever said to have gone missing without trace, you would presume he had been chucked in the Kura: Georgy Khabalov from Ortasheni in Kareli district; Valiko Georgievich Dryaev, who was born in 1951 and Yury Gavrilovich Kokoyev from Reni village in Kaspi district, were murdered and thrown in the Kura. Vladimir Lavrentievich Kokoyev, born in 1956 in Agara settlement was murdered and his body was strapped to a thick log driven into the bank of the Kura. The corpse was in the water for 18 days.

Zurab Konstantinovich Gabaraev, 33, from Kareli, had come from Russia on Orthodox Easter Day to pay his respects at his father's grave. They seized him in the cemetery, tortured and killed him then threw his body in the Kura, again strapped to a thick log driven into the ground. Nikolay Mikhailovich Kumaritov, born in 1931 in Natsreti village, was shot dead and his body was tipped into the Kura. Muraz Samsonovich Khabalashvili, born in 1961, and Khuto Shakroyevich Khabalashvili from Pitsesi village were selling meat in Gori market when members of the "Kostava Society" (an extreme Georgian nationalist movement - author) attacked them, shot them dead and threw their bodies in the Kura river. Givi Kondratievich Dudaev, born in 1950 in Tsitelubani village, was tied up, forced to put on a gas mask, then hurled alive into the Kura. There were many atrocities of this sort, but the list of the disappeared was far greater.

It was simply out of the question to stay on in villages or settlements that were accessible to Georgian armed mobs. It was dangerous to cross South Ossetia by road, because bandits would stop the traffic, take people hostage, and kill anyone who resisted on the spot. On 18 March 1991 a Georgian armed gang detained a "Ural" military vehicle in this way outside Eredvi village. It had been carrying Ossetians from Dmenis village to Tskhinval and the 12 men who were taken hostage, disappeared without trace.

Tens of thousands of Ossetians became refugees during the very first months of the war, and found their way to North Ossetia as best they could. A section of the road route to North Ossetia that passed through Georgian villages was blocked by armed Georgian gangs, and the only way out of South Ossetia was by a 25-kilometre detour via Zar, known popularly and in the press as the "Road to Life". In fact only the first stretch from Tbet village was an actual road. Further on it burrowed into the forest and turned into a path that previously no one would have thought of attempting by car – and which in happier times they previously had no need to. Even now, from January to April it was impassable by transport, except tractors fitted with caterpillar treads. Old men, women carrying babies, and small children clambered through the snow. If they had men to accompany them they were lucky; they could trample a path for them through the snow, and help to carry children and their belongings: the refugees didn't take much, because if they got stuck they would quickly freeze. Occasionally journalists would come out to meet the refugees. They were also on foot, relying on crampons, and laden with recording equipment and cameras. Not all of them could risk driving on the normal road through Georgian villages. There were reports of journalists being detained, especially Russian ones. Men who had accompanied the refugees would try to justify themselves and say "we're only helping them get away, then we'll be back. We're not refugees". There was no more shameful specimen than a grown man who was a refugee. One of the pieces shot by Soviet TV

journalists showed clips of an old married couple picking their way over a snowy path, clinging on to each other. When they reached a steep drop, the old man spread a large tartan shawl over the snow and told his wife to sit on it. The old woman tried her best, but still couldn't manage and kept falling off. The old man grabbed a hold of her, sat down; they both picked up their feet, pushed off and slid down the slope. The only commentary to the clip was: "Die you dirty dogs, die!"

Svetlana Tsakhilova was given a space in the "Nart" sanatorium in North Ossetia and tells how they "trod the paths that hunters use. The snow was up to our knees. The men went ahead, trampling down a path and we followed on. I was pushing my three-year-old son in front of me, and clinging to the trees with one hand myself, or I would never have made it up the slopes, and with the other hand I dragged my daughter along. I had strapped my three-month-old baby to her. The temperature was well below zero and I don't know how my son did not freeze to death! I was very lucky, although he is now in hospital. One woman's five-year-old died on the way." 140 refugees were billeted in a sanatorium built for 100 people.

In mid-February 1991, the Road to Life was cut off. There were avalanches on the Trans-Caucasus Road Route, and some of the refugees were forced to stay in Dzau district on the southern side of the mountains. Others were cut off from the Roki tunnel on both sides. Many sat in vehicles, waiting until access was cleared. Many did the four-kilometre tunnel on foot, carrying flaming torches.

Later the rain started and the snow thawed. The Zar detour became un-navigable. The sheer climbs and drops were dangerous, and there were landslips. Every so often they were cleared away by tractors. Vehicles would get stuck in the thick mud, night would fall, and everyone would have to spend the night in the forest. And still the number of refugees escaping by foot to North Ossetia dwindled at that time, while the number in Tskhinval grew. There was an occasion when an avalanche crushed a bus on the Trans-Caucasus Road Route, as it carried two electricians from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia who were trying to restore the electricity supply: Kazbek Isaev and Oleg Solovyov. A third man, Sergey Tskhovrebov, died with them. He had come on a family visit from Chelyabinsk in the Russia.

The main refugee reception centre in Vladikavkaz was on Dimitrov street. This was where people came who had nowhere else to go. People who had no relatives in North Ossetia, or who could not find them: refugees who were frozen, exhausted by their difficult journey, and often without a penny to their name. Some of them were entrusted to local centres, set up by the district authorities. For example, at the beginning of February there were already 260 refugees in the village of Nogir, who were given accommodation, a bag of flour and 3-4 kg of meat per family. The children were soon allocated places at two local schools and a few of the adults were taken on to work in the collective farm. The authorities decided that they would need to consider apportioning plots of land to refugee households in North Ossetian villages where they could build themselves houses. But 'the ones from Tskhinval and villages of South Ossetia should go back to their own homes', they thought. And that is what the majority of refugees wanted to do.

Georgians fleeing Tskhinval and nearby Georgian villages gravitated in the opposite direction – south to Georgia. A Centre was opened for refugees from South Ossetia, on Kostava Avenue in the capital, Tbilisi. According to data in the Georgian media, several dozen Georgian homes were torched in Tskhinval and some 7,000 Georgian refugees fled South Ossetia. Refugees were billeted in hotels in Tbilisi and other Georgian towns. They were given places in medical institutions, sanatoria and holiday resorts. Employment very soon became a pressing question for people who had lost their means of support as a result of the conflict. The Georgian media emphasised that this was a question of temporary work for refugees, and did not entertain the idea that they were there in Georgia for keeps. The refugees would tell their stories anonymously, and Georgian newspapers wrote in 1991: "They are afraid to give their names and hope this way their homes will escape the

arsonists' fires. They hope to go home and are frightened because of the 80 or so Georgian homes burned to the ground, and the two Georgian schools.”

The Georgian refugees were very active. In the “Iveria” hotel in Tbilisi in March 1991 they held a demonstration to draw the world’s attention to the “distorted pro-Ossetian view of the central Soviet press” and to draw the attention of world public opinion to their plight. There were scarcely any men among the refugees. As the newspapers put it: “They are defending their homes and their land”. Many refugees were living with relatives, or in the “Abkhazia” hotel, or other places. Nana A. from Tskhinval had been given room in the “Abkhazia” hotel and told a journalist that her grandmother was Ossetian. “When the pogroms started, my Ossetian neighbour invited me to stay the night with her, but it was still terrifying and next morning I fled to Tbilisi”.

The largest contingency of Georgian refugees from Tskhinval stayed in Gori. There they were safe and among their own people, but they still could not relax, as they waited for Georgian troops to bring the war to a victorious close. The great majority of people were weary to death of war and deprivation, and were on the verge of nervous collapse. “What can we live on in this bloody Gori where people look at us as though we were enemies? We would put up with any hardships if we were back at home in Tskhinval.” (“The South Ossetian Herald”, April 1992) That opinion was quite widespread among the refugees. Many were so attached to Tskhinval that they were ready to go back even if their homes had been torched. Like the refugees who were ethnic Ossetians, the Georgians also experienced hardship.

On 16 February 1991 the Soviet Defence Ministry newspaper in Moscow, “Red Star” published a letter from Tskhinval Georgians, which was also addressed to “Young Communist Truth”, “Izvestia” and other federal newspapers. They said: “We object to the crazy Anti-Ossetian propaganda in the Georgian media. Where do they get their slanderous lies? They say we Georgians are being persecuted, beaten up, barred from shops, and driven out of our homes. It is true that some Georgians have left Tskhinval for Tbilisi and elsewhere, but that was because of the intolerable conditions that armed Georgian gangs have created. We used to live in peaceable harmony and that is what we would like to go back to, but armed bands of Georgian extremists, who have nothing in common with ordinary Georgian people, have infiltrated our region and are ripping off our people. We wish the dismal politicians who have come to power in Tbilisi would just leave us in peace and stop trying to force Ossetians out of their land with terror and violence.” This was signed by A. Alborishvili, Zh. Kavtaradze, T. Kasradze, K. Kerashvili and others (31 in all). Many more Georgians felt the same, but not all of them wrote letters to the editor or gave interviews on TV. As it was, they were regarded as Public Enemy No 1 for staying in South Ossetia, and for not taking part in the attacks on Ossetians. Incidentally, they were not trusted by the Ossetians either, and if Georgian gangs got their hands on any ethnic Georgians who had stayed behind in Tskhinval, they did not waste time on pleasantries.

On 29 August 1991, Felix Archilovich Kharebov was driving Vladimir Stepanovich Odikadze (1930) and Ivan Mikhailovich Odikadze (1942) from Tskhinval by ambulance to a funeral in Ksuis village in the outlying district. Vladimir Odikadze used to work for the Soviet Georgian newspaper “Dawn of the East” and was married to an Ossetian woman. In Eredvi village, all three were set upon by armed Georgians, tortured and murdered. Vladimir Odikadze’s wife Natalya Politovna Dzhioyeva (1932) was one of eight people murdered during shooting in Tskhinval on the night of 13 June 1992.

Georgians who fled Tskhinval did everything to demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to the Georgian government, although they had suffered no less than the Ossetian refugees, and had also lost their land. Vasil Sabanadze was a journalist with former “Sabchota Ossetia” (“Soviet Ossetia”) that was founded in Gori and later published his own newspaper there. On 28 May 1991, he wrote in “Sakartvelos Respublika” (“The Georgian Republic”): “Every refugee supported Z Gamsakhurdia’s candidacy for President. We were told that the residents of Shida Kartli [“The Georgian Hinterland” –

the Georgian nationalist name for South Ossetia – trans.] whose houses had been torched were bound to oppose him; that his decree on abolishing the region was responsible for our expulsion. I have met with all the refugees, but to a man they support Gamsakhurdia. Take one example: Beglar Bortsvadze, the father of eight children.

His wife had given birth just a few days earlier and they were living in a hotel in Gori. He was from Mamisaantubani village in Tskhinval district and Ossetian extremists had forced him out of his house but still, he and his wife Grunya Odikadze, think that Zviad Gamsakhurdia should be President of Georgia, and that abolition of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region was the only correct thing to do.”

Georgia’s Great Leader was largely indifferent to the fate of people who were the inevitable victims of the war he was unleashing. His only concern was winning the military operation. To give an example, six months before fighting broke out, the children’s home in Kurta village four kilometres outside Tskhinval, was closed down on an invented pretext. The building was re-fitted as a field hospital, because it was a perfect design for this in a war. One group of pupils was relocated in children’s homes in Georgia and another was shifted to Tskhinval. The Georgian children were allocated space in a kindergarten and clothing, bedding, food and books were collected for them, and schooling was put in place. They were known as School No 13 because the town had only twelve schools before. Just before the outbreak of war, it was winter holidays for the children. They were sent off wherever could be found, but some children stayed behind and lived in the premises of the school because they had nowhere else to go, and that is where the outbreak of war found them. They used to sleep in the kindergarten under gunfire, then later the authorities had to relocate them too.

In the meantime from early 1991 Georgia began preaching a manic cult of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Its parliament adopted laws that ensured his election as President, and a law on Defending the Honour and Dignity of the President was adopted with criminal penalties of up to six years’ imprisonment, that failed to define criteria for ‘insulting’ him. The electoral law itself was amended three times, once within five days’ of its adoption, and twice in the course of the 12-day campaign. Once was to prevent the registration of Dzhaba Ioseliani as a candidate. He was the leader of a banned military grouping in Georgia, at that time in custody. Shortly afterwards, a Special Supplement was added to the Electoral Law, that gave the Georgian Parliament the authority to disband the Electoral Commission ‘if it violated the law’.

At every stage of the electoral process, the law imposed such tight deadlines that no one without serious pre-electoral support and organisational back-up to promote his fame and reputation - i.e. no one who was not currently Head of State – had any chance of participating. Georgian laws not only ensured Gamsakhurdia election by overwhelming majority, but also unlimited power and security of tenure. The President himself was to issue Decrees and confirm laws adopted by the Georgian Supreme Soviet. He had the authority to return legislation for a re-vote, and if the parliament reiterated its first decision, the President could call a referendum. He was empowered to rescind any decision the government or its ministers had taken, and to dissolve parliament at his own discretion. He enjoyed immunity as president and could be removed from office only by Parliament, if it had decided by a 75% parliamentary majority that he had betrayed his country. And a Parliament that was completely under his heel would never take a decision of that kind.

After his election on 26 May 1991, President Zviad Gamsakhurdia appealed “To the People of Samachablo” (one of the Georgian names for South Ossetia). He said: “As a result of earthquakes, in Gori alone, its outlying district and of course adjoining Tskhinvali district, over 4,600 homes have been destroyed, and large groups of refugees have amassed in the cities of Georgia. Of course all of Georgia is helping them, but still it is awkward to stay long in somebody else’s home. I don’t want the Georgian citizen to get used to pity, or all our good work will be wasted. Therefore I think we should

regard only the residents of Tskhinvali and Gudjabauri in Tskhinvali's outskirts as refugees, and then only the women and children. It is time for everyone else to go back to their own villages. Compatriots! Refugees from Samachablo! Look to your own roots, or people will come again from over the mountains and make our property their own, as has happened so often before. God sees all, and knows we have nothing more to lose and nothing more to give, and so everyone who goes back to Samachablo will be a fortress for Georgia. Men of Tskhinvali, I beseech you to take part in the reconstruction of Georgian villages and defend your motherland. Anyone who does not will be regarded as a traitor. Everyone must remember that the fate of Georgia is being decided in its hinterland, Shida Kartli. We restored historic justice when we returned Tskhinvali to Gori district, and Kornisi to Kareli district!"

He said this to ethnic Georgian refugees, and they were meant to feel that they had just got something back...

To be fair, one should note that South Ossetian leaders made no direct appeals to the refugees, even of that kind. Their silence meant that they had other priorities. Maybe they did indeed have other things on their mind, and more important things needed to be done to protect their Homeland. But at the same time they should not have lost sight of the fact that once peace was finally restored to a free South Ossetia, someone would have to live there. That was why the South Ossetian leadership frequently appealed to the North Ossetian government to facilitate the return of an able-bodied work force to reconstruct Dzau district after the earthquake, and naturally, to defend the Homeland. With this aim in view, for example, 300 plots of land were set aside in Tskhinval district alone for ethnic Ossetians who had fled to North Ossetia from Georgia – but for the time being the take-up rate was low.

Nine people died in Dzau district as a result of the earthquake on 29 April, which reached Point 8 on the Richter scale - four of them pupils at orphanage – and the earthquake destroyed 95% of the housing. In Tskhinval the earthquake peaked at Point 7 on the scale. Khakhet village in Dzau district and all its residents - about 60 people - was buried in a landslide. Only two men survived, who happened not to be in the village at the time. There was massive destruction in Tskhinval district, which increased the flood of refugees in North Ossetia, and North Ossetian newspapers published appeals from South Ossetian leaders and public organisations to all refugees, to return home unless their presence in North Ossetia absolutely necessary. Teachers at a conference in Tskhinval that August urged all refugees to get back to South Ossetia as soon as they could. But no face-to-face work was actually being done with the refugees, and the South Ossetian leadership were not able to take responsibility for calling all functioning Ossetians back to defend South Ossetia, when they had had to flee from Georgia.

Local residents in North Ossetia were irritated by having to give help to healthy young men – but usually at the later stages of the refugees' stay in North Ossetia. At the beginning their main instinct was to take in people who had lost everything and help them survive the tragedy that had overwhelmed them. And people were still coming, finding their way to Vladikavkaz, sometimes by the most surprising routes.

Story No 4. Into Armenia, on foot

Bechir Bitarov comes from Ghinturi village in the Gujareti Gorge, Borjomi district of Georgia, and now lives in the settlement of "Ir", in Prigorodny district of North Ossetia. He says: "Even before, they used to come and circle round the villages, especially if they suspected someone was harbouring weapons. But they never found anything except the odd ornamental silver

dagger, and a few hunting guns, that they confiscated. They even took in all the training rifles from schools. One evening they flagged down the Gujareti bus on its way back from Borjomi, took all the passengers hostage and drove them off to Tbilisi. They were released only the next day, all of them badly beaten. Usually when they picked up Ossetians in Borjomi, they planted cartridges on them or something else, and beat them up for “possessing weapons”. We were afraid and didn’t go into town or the market any more. After the incident with the Gujareti bus, it was plain we needed to get out.

That morning, on 15 April, they burst into our village – in vehicles and firing weapons in the air. People scarpered, absolutely terrified. They came into the houses, turned everything upside down, and took the best things for themselves: they probably realised they couldn’t fit the whole lot in their cars. At first they wanted to put us in buses and take us away, but a rumour started that we were being rounded up to be shot. And so we left for the south on foot – some of us through Tsalka, others via Akhalkalaki. No one stayed in Gujareti. Many people were in tears but everyone still had hopes that justice would be restored by somebody in authority. The only thing on everyone’s mind was how they would make ends meet when they came back to their empty houses. We got as far as the Tabatskuri Lake when we saw that some Armenians had come out on foot to help us, and they helped us get as far as Akhalkalaki, where we stayed in their homes for 11 days. Then they arranged buses for us to go to Armenia and we were taken in Leninakan, given accommodation in army barracks built after the earthquake, and fed free of charge. From there we were flown in two aeroplanes to Beslan in North Ossetia. All of us felt so depressed and sad that we were not even able to thank these people properly.

Batyr Tibilov picks up this story. He came originally from Odeti village in Gujareti district, but now lives in the Zavodskoy suburb of Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. He says: “The Armenians brought us to Bezhanov village in Akhalkalaki district. Next day, Valery Sukhiashvili, the Prefect of Borjomi turned up. He asked the Armenians to gather us all together in the clubhouse. He had some officials with him from Borjomi. Sukhiashvili tried to persuade us to go back to the Gujareti Gorge, and not to leave Georgia, and he promised to guarantee our safety. The local Armenians did not really trust him and shouted: ‘Look at the state of these people as they fled their homes!’ We were even afraid they would say too much on our account, and start some sort of Georgian-Armenian conflict.

Sukhiashvili left empty-handed. The Armenians gave us four armoured transports from the army base, and accompanied by Armenian and Russian soldiers, we set off back to Gujareti, to collect the sick and elderly we had left behind. We drove round the villages, picking up all the remaining Ossetians. In Syrkhkæu village we came across the Margiev family who had stayed behind because their oldest member – Yefim Margiev – was dying and died at the very moment the villagers were driven out. His nearest relatives tried to give him a traditional burial, but the Georgians would not even allow them to make him a coffin. And so that was how they buried him. We gathered them all up and left.

I think the Georgians had found out that at the start of the war we had collected money for Tskhinval. I went round with the hat myself and gave the money to “Adæmon Nykhas”, [South Ossetia’s national political movement- author]. We even had a meeting, organised by the writer Meliton Kaziev, and that was why there was such strong Georgian feeling against the Gujareti Gorge area. But that was just the pitiful contribution of our people, who were blockaded into a town that was encircled by enemies. When Tamara Sanakoyeva was buried during our last days in the place, the Georgians even deployed armoured vehicles at all the access points to her village, anticipating that her son Georgy would come from Tskhinval for her funeral. They had murdered her in Gverdisubani village and were trying everything they knew to break our links with Tskhinval.

The figures are incomplete, but out of a total of 9 villages in Gujareti Gorge, at least 225 families were expelled - around 820 people. Residents of the Gorge knew each other very well and a large number were related, so news that a few people in Gujareti Gorge and Borjomi district had been murdered spread total panic among them. The Georgians had killed ordinary people, most of them elderly, not fighting men. Here is a list that may not be complete.

Suliko Sergeevich Kumaritov, (1931), from Bakuriani, was working on a farm when some Georgians came up and led him into a courtyard, where they forced 16 litres of water down him. He died in agony, and was given a hasty burial with no coffin.

Boris Davidovich Gagloyev, (1941), was a shepherd from Greater Mitarbi (Didi Mitarbi - trans). They beat him to death, hung his corpse from a bridge, then took it down, tied it to a car and dragged it all the way to Borjomi.

Tamara Abazovna Pliyeva-Sanakoyeva, (1925), was a resident of Gverdisubani village. She was shot in the back as she ran away from armed men on the veranda of her own home.

Georgy (Gigutsa) Dmitrievich Sanakoyev, (1932), lived in Bakuriani. He was attacked out in the fields, shot, and his body was burned in the boiler house stove.

The following people were also murdered:

Efim Romanovich Margiev; Datiko Tomaev; Lemon Kiazoyevich Dzhagaev; Georgy (Zhora) Kiazoyevich Sanakoyev (1931); and Toma Nikolaevich Khubaev (1926) all from Borjomi. Anzor Golaevich Kvezerov; Longioz Gagiev; Dzherbin Dzheyranov from Bakuriani. Pado Davidovich Gagloyev; Karaman Somaevich Makiev (1933); Suliko Lvovich Dzhigkaev (1958); Soslan Alexandrovich Tadtaev (1930); Anzor Balaevich Bitarov (1965) all from the village of Greater Mitarbi (Didi Mitarbi – trans).

Of course it must be said that today, 14 years later, brutal murders no longer shock us so much, and we no longer find them so unthinkable and so hard to credit – after all the conflict and war former Soviet territory has seen. The amount of terror, hatred and aggression we have absorbed during these years has produced a defence mechanism against bad happenings –to save us going out of our minds. But back then, in 1991, the hatred of Ossetians and violence towards them sanctioned by Georgia's Great Leader had a different moral valency. It wasn't enough just to steal from them and beat them. It wasn't even enough just to put a 'humane' bullet through their heads somewhere on the edge of a village. Ossetians had to be filled with panic and dread on such a scale that they would never contemplate returning even years later, when 'justice had been restored by somebody in authority'. For this the Georgians adopted a 'scorched earth' policy: in Ossetian settlements everything was destroyed that could be considered to connect them with the land. Villages were reduced to ash, and on occasions even the ash was symbolically flattened out by bulldozer. Cattle were driven out of the village or destroyed. Property was confiscated in total. But even this seemed insufficient: when a political settlement to conflict has been found, people can return even to the site of a fire, simply from love of their native soil and the place where their ancestors are buried. That was when they got the idea of settling Georgians on the territory that had been vacated. Avtandil Margiani, Vice Premier of Georgia and last Secretary General of the Georgian Communist Party, was the official author of this plan at a session of the Supreme Soviet on 11 December 1990 - the same one that successfully abolished South Ossetian Autonomy. He said: "...We remember how, as far back as Soviet times, the Georgians and Ossetians of this region were ready to take in 500 families, who had suffered natural disasters in Georgia's Svaneti mountains, and re-settle them in Tskhinvali district. But nothing came of the initiative. Today I suggest we settle around 2,000 people from Svaneti in this region. They are also recovering from natural disaster, and today, when steps are being taken to restore justice in the Republic, I think this idea is fully realisable".

Historical fact shows that in 1920, after the Georgian Menshevik government had exterminated and expelled Ossetians, it also set up a special commission to move the remaining ones off South Ossetian soil once and for all and re-populate the territory with incomers from other regions of Georgia.

But Genocide is defined not only the quantity of blood spilled. An eye-witness reports that in a village church in Kintsvisi, Gori district, an ancient fresco of the Ossetian royalty – Princess Tamara and Prince Soslan - was obliterated. [Ossetian Prince David-Soslan was the husband of Georgian Princess Tamara, in the earliest days of the Georgian state in the 12 century – author].

Ivan Bagaev, a former journalist with the “Soveton Iryston” (“Soviet Ossetia”) describes how his house was burned down twice. The first time was in 1920 and the second just now, in 1991. According to him, more than 30 Georgian families were moved from Kheit village in Tskhinval district to the villages of Shavshvebi, Tsitelubani and Variani in Gori district. They were given Ossetian houses and lands. Some rented property for their relatives and stayed in Kheit themselves.

‘Well, let them stay there, as long as they keep their heads down’ no longer applied as a principle. Far-reaching plans to purge Georgian territory of ‘alien elements’ were being made by the nationalist Georgian government and from time to time found indirect expression in this speech or that, for example by N. Natadze, [the leader of the Georgian “National Front” – the most reactionary wing of the Georgian nationalist movement – author] at a press conference he gave at the Peace Committee in Moscow, in early February 1991. He said: “Georgian nationalist circles always had a particular attitude to Ossetians in Georgia, which was: we must molycoddle them in every way we can. We must assist their cultural and political development in every way possible. Why? Not just for humanitarian reasons, of course. We did it because we had to keep a reserve on tap, which in the case of necessity – and that necessity was bound to arise – would argue the Ossetian case within Ossetia itself: the Ossetia that today goes by the name of North Ossetia. You know how hard it is for Ossetians who live there. You know what force the Russian population exerts. We want Ossetians to hold fast. We want them to reassert their cause and not to lose their national identity there. We are doing everything we can to ensure that the Ossetians have an Ossetian school – not one of those token schools, that gets called Ossetian but where the teaching is done in Russian. We are fighting for a real Ossetian school. Whole generations have been brought up not knowing that this land is not Ossetia. This is a part of Georgia that was never a separate entity – not economically, not culturally and not politically. Why does this territory need to be renamed “Ossetia”? There is where indigenous Georgian people have lived since time immemorial, but where Ossetians arrived mainly in the second half of the 19th century.”

It so happened that 115 thousand refugees left South Ossetia and Georgia for North Ossetia, to brave the misfortune of losing their nationality as a result of the force the Russian component exerts. As Zviad Gamsakhurdia put it, “there must be proof that they are refugees. They are simply émigrés”. The Georgians got strangely hot and bothered about the level of national culture in North Ossetia. Even Ilia II, the Patriarch Catholicos of Georgia, wrote about this to the Patriarch of Moscow and All-Russia, Alexey II, at a time when there was fighting in the streets of Tskhinval. He wrote: “Your Holiness, I would like you to know that there is no ethnic conflict in Georgia. The Ossetian cultural autonomy in Georgia is extremely high. In fact it is no secret to anyone that the educational and cultural level of the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic is far lower than that of Ossetians in Georgia.” Which again brings to mind the famous saying about the Vikings and the north wind that created them.

But for the time being, North Ossetia with its “low educational and cultural level” was giving refuge to old men, women and children from South Ossetia, who were fleeing annihilation by highly cultured Georgians. And as it did, the Patriarch Catholicos of All Georgia uttered not one word of protest

against the thousands of tragedies inflicted by his fellow Georgians. He did, on the other hand, issue a supremely eloquent decree that chimed beautifully with Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalist policy, to which he had given his blessing – as did Shevardnadze, who ousted him, and Saakashvili, who ousted him in turn.

The Extraordinary Decree of the Patriarch Catolicos of All Georgia was read out on 28 October 1990 after prayers in the Patriarch's Sioni Cathedral:

“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, I instruct:

That henceforth, the murderer of any Georgian, regardless of the guilt or innocence of the victim (the one murdered) shall be called an enemy of the Georgian people. Their name will be entered in a special book of the Patriarchate and transmitted from generation to generation as a fitting and shameful punishment. This Extraordinary Decree is adopted, in order to extirpate the most heinous sin and crime against God and the nation – fratricide – from Georgia, until kingdom come. “

Georgians were exempt from punishment even when they had committed crimes against identifiable Ossetians whose names were known to witnesses.

Very often their attackers were neighbours, although some of them still masked their faces. Refugee Geno Khabalov came from Ksuisi village in Tskhinval district, where there were only 40 Ossetian families among 200 households. He described how armed Georgians came into his house on 28 January. “Their faces were covered with scarves, and they strode about very confidently. They started hitting me and my wife, and asking where we kept our money. There were about 1,800 roubles in the bedside table, and they asked for more, but we didn't have any more. They began hitting us with their rifle butts and my wife passed out. Then they tied us both up and went out. About an hour and half later, we managed to free ourselves. My wife's gold dental crowns had disappeared. It seems that our attackers were the neighbours. The fighters' base was in the mill.”

Ossetian refugees from Znaur district named the Georgians who burst into their village and created mayhem. They were Robert Kharauli, Tamaz Kobaladze, Giya Gagnidze and others.

On 18 November 1991, the following people were taken captive by Georgian bandits who burst into Monaster village in Leningor district: Tengiz Botoyevich Valiev (1938); Archil Arsenovich Karaev (1930); Viktor Levanovich Khubaev (1931); Shaliko Dianozovich Karaev (1944) and Dzhambolat Vakhtangovich Valiev (1960). They were taken away in an unknown direction and their families each raised 40 thousand roubles' ransom. But the hostages were not freed, and the money was not given back either. The villagers who had lost their relatives knew very well who the bandits were. They were all from Leningor settlement: Malkhaz Kanchelashvili and Dzhemal Midelashvili, who later became a policeman in Leningor, and Goga Ekaladze.

Dmitry Valiev, a refugee from Tsveri village in Gori district gave the name of a Paata Gurdzhanidze. He was identified too by many former residents of Kareli district, who alleged he had inflicted bloodshed on numerous Ossetians with complete impunity. Valiev said: “There were 60 households in our village, all of them Ossetian, while Georgians lived in the next village of Lower Tsveri. We were all on good terms until the anti-Ossetian incidents began and they told us we had to clear out of our village. Paata Gurdzhanidze was the leader of the extremists. First they stole our car, then our property, then they started beating us up. Anyone who put up resistance got murdered. Over that period they murdered Wilhelm Valiev and Soso Pukhaev, even though they were ethnic Georgians related to Ossetians by marriage. They were seized and driven off to the Georgian cemetery, then made to walk round it in a circle before being taken to the banks of the Kura River and shot. We were not allowed to bury them. Money was constantly being extorted from other villagers. On 29 March we were ordered to the village centre where we were told that a demonstration was

supposedly to take place. There, 21 of us were seized and bundled them into the back of a lorry. We thought we were being taken to be shot. But we were driven to Auneu village in Znaur district, unloaded and handed over to other armed men, who beat us up then again loaded us into a vehicle and drove us off towards Bekmar village. There we were swapped for Georgians and since then we have stayed here. Georgians are living in our houses.”

Not all the bandits were leaders of extremist groups (in those days that even had a distinguished ring to it). Some were just village thieves and looters who would drag things out their Ossetian neighbours' houses, that nowadays seem even ridiculous. But for an impoverished villager, it was not just money that was important. And money was usually very scrupulously hidden in people's homes. Here is an example of classic burglary, of the 1991 vintage:

It happened to Keto and Melo Kaziev from Nog-Qæu village in the Otreu Gorge.

Melo: “They left people with nothing. Anything that took their fancy, they carried out and carted off. Everything they thought was not valuable they broke and threw in the fire. From me alone they stole bedding, feather pillows, a carpet, 10 chairs, 2 tables, a television, a gas cooker and three gas canisters, a lot of wine, vodka, two sacks of wheat and three of maize. I know who the looters were. For example, my carpet was stolen by the sons of Mito Sabanashvili and Abel Elikashvili.”

Keto is an elderly woman who was knocked over by the thieves while they carried out their robbery and broke her arm. She says: “They stole the electric “Druzhba” saw, bedding, clothes and chickens. They emptied sacks of maize and flour, and smashed and crushed anything that came to hand. I still managed to stash something away into a hole with one hand, and when we recently went back by armoured car, I was able to dig out the remains of the property I had left. A journalist photographed me doing it. Iosif Kaziev was 80 years old and they beat him to death. They murdered Valiko Kaziev and his wife Olya Bibilova, and threw their bodies in the ravine. They also threw Geriso Pukhaev in the ravine, thinking he was dead, but he was only wounded and during the night somehow managed to clamber out and up to a bridge where he hid. They torched the homes of Volodya Doguzov, Mitushi Kisiev and Kudza Pukhaev. They all had a good living and now they have been left with nothing. Senko, Sergey, Yefim and Georgy Kaziev and others also had solid homesteads.

They drove off all the cattle, and even took the chickens away. Everyone who came to our door asked one and the same question: ‘Where is Meliton Kaziev, your extremist writer? Where are you hiding him?’ They stripped and smashed up his home. May their hands wither and fall off. We spent the night in the forest and in the morning came back to the village, when they had gone away. Some people were asleep and some people were keeping guard. Others were cooking or digging holes where they could save at least some of their belongings. Soon we had no cattle left and no food. Every day we were ‘visited’ by one new armed gang after another. We could not take it any longer and moved out to the forest. One by one we began preparing to leave for Saba, and thence to Goret. For two weeks we stayed at Sograt Khachirov’s house – may God grant him good health! – and from there Valiko Margiev accompanied us to Andoret. Nine of us stayed with them for 9 days. There were between 4 and 6 people from the Otreu Gorge in each house in Bender, Akhalisa and Bikar. May God bless you, you good people! Olga Bibilova wrote their story in “Soviet Ossetia” on 31 August 1991.

- “The situation today is very like what it was in 1921, isn't it?” The TV journalist Andrei Karaulov asked Zviad Gamsakhurdia.
- “Yes, it's very like 1921” came the reply. “Then, as now, the Russian empire was trying to use Georgian hands to do what it wanted with our land.”

But what was the 'Russian Empire' really trying to do?

Moscow continued pretending to be in complete control of the situation, whilst postponing the introduction of a State of Emergency throughout South Ossetia. Technically, the Georgian Republic needed to agree to the introduction of a State of Emergency, although in an Autonomous Region, the USSR President was constitutionally entitled to propose one to the USSR Supreme Soviet, without recourse to the Georgian authorities. A two thirds majority was needed for the proposal to be adopted, but every time MPs raised the question, they came up against the views of President Gorbachev and the USSR Interior Ministry.

At a session of the USSR Supreme Soviet on 26 February 1991, for example, Soviet Interior Minister Boris Pugo reported on the increasing armament of both sides; on the growing number of self-defence units; on hostage-taking by both sides; on an attack by Georgian vigilantes wearing police uniform on a motorcade that was under military escort. He said that since the outbreak of conflict in South Ossetia 33 people had died - 14 Ossetians and 19 Georgians (data from rural areas evidently not being at his disposal). But when MPs proposed a State of Emergency for the whole region, he said they should not pre-empt the conclusions of the Georgian parliamentary session meeting that day. And like the Georgian state, the Georgian parliament meant – Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia laid out his own programme for settling the 'crisis in South Ossetia'. He appealed to the Ossetian people to lay down their weapons and illegal armed units, and create 'a legitimate authority' in Tskhinval - at the same time emphasising that the governing structures of the old disbanded Autonomous Region were inadmissible. He envisaged that Ossetians were to retain all their former autonomous cultural rights, and have municipal elections, as well as a newly-created Prefecture. He said: "A Prefect must be appointed in Tskhinvali who will command the majority support of Georgians and Ossetians, and all this will give the Georgian parliament the opportunity to restore peace and stability in the region." Out of interest, did he know many 'appointed prefects' who enjoyed majority popular support?

N. Nazarbaev summarised the situation in Russia very well. He wrote that: "Despite everyone's good intentions, the power struggle between Soviet President Gorbachev, and Russian President Yeltsin has stymied the situation... Laws do not work because Gorbachev and his entourage are weak."

And so the Kremlin marked time on the principle that 'the worse it gets the better it is', and tried nudging Georgia to sign the Union Treaty as it fought with the Ossetians. That much was plain to see. "The Kremlin has decided to fight us with Ossetian help, and thwart the restoration of our independence. The Kremlin has said so straight out: 'Until you sign the Union Treaty, until you take part in the Union Referendum, you will have problems in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.' In other words, a continuation of the blood-letting. The message is unequivocal. The events in Samachbalo – are a punitive operation by the Kremlin." So said Zviad Gamsakhurdia at a Tbilisi press conference on 13 March 1991. We do not know if the central government did explicitly say these things, but its inertia might indeed lead us to that conclusion.

Meanwhile, new Russian leader Yeltsin was anxious to strengthen his democratic credentials and immediately tried to distance himself from the Gamsakhurdia he had for some reason called 'my friend' in one interview. A meeting between them was scheduled for Tbilisi at the end of February but Yeltsin did not come, his only explanation being that he was ill. Gamsakhurdia was hurt. He said: "I suspect the Soviet KGB were involved. There have been two attempts on Yeltsin's life, one in Spain and another in Moscow. It may be he delayed his visit because he anticipated a third terrorist attack." Yeltsin was travelling all over Russia and demonstrating 'who was boss' in every way he could, including in North Ossetia.

On 23 March 1991 he was in Sunzha settlement, where South Ossetians have lived since the 1920 genocide. The Chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet met refugees from South Ossetia in the “Nart” sanatorium and greeted them in Ossetic: “Uæ bon khorz”.⁵ He immediately announced that he had never met Gamsakhurdia and was not his friend, although the central Soviet newspapers muddied the waters with an interview in which Gamsakhurdia hinted that with Yeltsin’s help he would restrict North Ossetia’s interference in Georgia’s internal affairs. Yeltsin said he was intending to meet him to discuss the signing of a Russian-Georgian treaty, on condition that this would reinstate law and order in South Ossetia. The meeting took place that same day in Kazbegi in north Georgia, and the two leaders decided to set up a special representative Commission of the Russian and Georgian Ministries of Internal Affairs, and create a joint unit to disarm all illegal military formations and restore legitimate government. The treaty partners undertook to facilitate the return of refugees, help them rebuild their homes and secure the withdrawal of Soviet Army units from Tskhinval, by redeploying its sapper and helicopter regiments outside the city. This implied that the Soviet army was the source of the illicit weaponry that was hindering peace in the region. The military were indignant at this suggestion.

The next day a Special Purpose unit from the Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs was strafed in Dvani village in the Kareli district of Georgia. Five Georgian vigilantes who had set fire to several homes in the Ossetian village of Veleebi, were detained at the scene of the crime.

The whole of the North Ossetian leadership took part in the meeting between Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia at Kazbegi. In the signed record of the Minutes, both sides used the formulation “the former Autonomous Region”, Yeltsin deliberately insisting on using the nomenclature of Soviet Union. Akhsarbek Galazov, the Chair of the Supreme Soviet of the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was there and said he did this because Gamsakhurdia had insisted upon referring to “Shida Kartli” and “Tskhinvali region”.

North Ossetia at that time was anticipating its own major upheavals. It was preparing to adopt a Law on the Rehabilitation of Suppressed Nations, that would allow the deported Ingush to lay territorial claim to the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia. Since the 1920s, this district had been home to Ossetians banished from South Ossetia by Georgian raiders, and to new waves of refugees from Georgia’s hinterland. Only Yeltsin could delete the clause about territorial restoration from the law. Thousands upon thousands of demonstrators were on the streets of the Ingush capital Nazran for more than a week, demanding the return of the Ingush autonomy and the territory where they had lived before their deportation in 1944. When he reached Nazran, Yeltsin supported the demonstrators and said: “Each nation has the right to independent self-government”.

It was in the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia that most refugees from South Ossetia and Georgia had been housed. By March 1991, their numbers already topped 50 thousand. This was where South Ossetians had dropped roots after fleeing Georgia in the 1920s. Coincidentally, it was also where Ossetians driven out of South Ossetia were forcibly re-settled, in territory vacated by the Ingush during their own deportation in 1944. After Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had restored the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1957, the Ingush returned to homes in Prigorodny district that had been theirs since 1922.

Most of the South Ossetians deported in the 1920s and 1940s were forced to abandon their own homes in Prigorodny district and move to compact settlements in North Ossetia. The Law on Rehabilitation that was in the process of adoption did not envisage the restoration and rehabilitation of their legal rights. No one was intending to give them back their own homes, and no one gave a thought to rehabilitating the Cossacks, who in their day had also settled Prigorodny district. Naturally

⁵ “I bid you Good Day” – author.

the Law also did not envisage the restoration of the territorial and political integrity of Ossetia, which had been forcibly split into a Northern and a Southern part in the 1920s.

In this way, events in South Ossetia directly influenced the internal political situation of Russia. The supreme legislative bodies of Russia and the USSR demanded that the Georgian parliament and South Ossetian leadership take all steps necessary to enable the refugees to return home - demands they knew were destined to fail. On 1 April 1991 the USSR Supreme Soviet recommended that the Soviet President declare a State of Emergency throughout South Ossetian territory in accordance with Article 127 (15) of the USSR Constitution and enforce it with Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs. But President Gorbachev still 'saw no need for a State of Emergency'.

After an interval of three months the blockade of South Ossetia was finally lifted and columns of cargo from Russia and North Ossetia moved at last along the Dzau-Tskhinval road. Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs cleared obstructions along the road, that had been mined by Georgian extremists to prevent the transport's passage, and neutralised 10 powerful home-made detonators along the route. Ninety-six lorries reached the city, bringing flour, tinned foods, medicines, cigarettes and humanitarian aid from Germany. The produce was intended above all for refugees, of whom there were already around 7,000 in Tskhinval.

By this time North Ossetia was becoming increasingly certain that as long as South Ossetia held out, there would be peace in the North Caucasus. If South Ossetia were to fall, then a war would break out in the North. Street demonstrations called for armed volunteer units to go down to South Ossetia, and the people who demonstrated most actively were those who had come from South Ossetia during the 1920 war. Around 80 thousand of them were living in North Ossetia at that time. They drew parallels with 1920, when a South Ossetian brigade had been formed that set off for the south and defeated the regular Georgian Army under Noe Jordania⁶. The demonstrators urged the central Soviet authorities to cut off the gas supply to Georgia that transited North Ossetia; to sever communications; shut down electricity supplies; declare a reprisal economic blockade against Georgia, and apply discriminatory sanctions to 13 thousand Georgians living in North Ossetia.

In reply, General G Malyushkin, the Head of the Operational Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs in South Ossetia, asked: "Did South Ossetia consult the 28 thousand Georgians living there, before it declared its own republic? Why did the central authorities say nothing in September 1990 when South Ossetia declared itself a Republic?" Georgia, incidentally, did not ask its 164 thousand Ossetians if they objected to the Republic's leaving the USSR.

Very soon, the USSR was history, although there were repeated attempts to revive it. The Declaration of Human Rights adopted by an Extraordinary Congress of Soviets after the August 1991 coup attempt, gave each sovereign republic the right to run its internal affairs without outside interference, including republics that had refused to sign the new Union Treaty. The rights of national minorities in Georgia were completely surrendered to a dictatorial regime. Republics that once shared a common country found it inexpedient to give priority to human rights in the resolution of their inter-ethnic relations. Economic sanctions would have been the most effective punishment for Georgia's abuse of human rights, but they would have had to be levied jointly by all the newly sovereign republics.

By September 1991, there were around 500 thousand internal refugees or internally displaced persons in the USSR. One hundred and fifty thousand of them were in Russia and more than half of these were refugees from South Ossetia and the hinterland of Georgia, taken in by North Ossetia.

⁶ The leader of the Georgian Menshevik Government, who organised a punitive expedition into Soviet South Ossetia in 1920 - author.

Some refugees ended up in Krasnodar Territory, in Stavropol, in Kemerovo in Central Siberia, and even in Magadan region on the Pacific seaboard. Russia set up new organisations: the Russian Republic Supreme Soviet Human Rights Committee; the Moscow City Soviet Commission for Refugee Affairs; the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; the Committee for Russian Refugees, etc. The state provided some of the components of 'a transient life': work, accommodation and humanitarian aid – but these marginalised people could not resolve their problems without having refugee status, registered residency and legally guaranteed rights. North Ossetia continued receiving refugees in this legislative vacuum, right until 1993.

The Deputy Head of the Migration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Domenty Kulumbegov describes those days like this: "A massive flood of refugees to North Ossetia began in January 1991. Naturally, the most difficult question was where to put them all. Many stayed with relatives and other people they knew, but not all had that possibility. And so sanatoria, rest homes, student hostels, former children's camps, and other adapted buildings were brought into use, including warehouses and business premises. And there were occasions when complete strangers put up refugees for a while. At first refugees who were settled in compact groups were given food. Local authorities earmarked staff specially to work on registering the forced migrants under the guidance of the Committee on Nationality Affairs of the North Ossetian Government. Their difficulties were magnified by the fact that these were virtually the first large wave of migrants to Russia. I should remind you that in those days Russia had no normative legislative base to define how to take in, register, or finance expenditures arising from the hosting of refugees. It was in these conditions that North Ossetia accepted about 115 thousand refugees from South Ossetia and the central districts of Georgia.

This was a colossal burden for North Ossetia in all respects – suffice it to say that refugees comprised over 17% of the republic's population: a catastrophic correlation by international standards, and one then unparalleled in any other region of Russia. In the early days, the republic assumed the whole burden of receiving and assisting the refugees itself, with help from the federal centre. International humanitarian help came later and, naturally, not in the shape or size needed at the time. Neither Russia as a whole, nor North Ossetia in particular, were in a position to react adequately to the disaster that had befallen these people, and neither Russia nor North Ossetia could provide the rapid assistance they needed to sort themselves out in new surroundings. We should remember what things were like at the beginning of the 1990s in Russia itself: all the old structures had broken down and effective new ones had yet to replace them. The complicated financial situation meant that civil servants and miners got no pay; OAPs received no pensions, and strikes gripped virtually the whole country. The first federal laws "On Refugees" and "On Involuntarily Displaced Persons" were adopted only in 1993, and so the process of refugee re-settlement was tardy throughout the whole of Russia, not just in North Ossetia".

On 26 October 1991 A. Galazov, the Chairman of the North Ossetian Supreme Soviet signed an appeal to the USSR State Soviet, which referred to the tragic turn of events in Georgia, and the gross violation of the elementary rights of national minorities. He called what had happened the 'virtual genocide' of the Ossetian people. "The number of refugees has reached 53,000, and the resumption of military activity could provoke a new wave of migration. All this has multiplied the Republic's problems. It has an acute shortage of accommodation, edibles and essential goods, and all of this means significant difficulties. The demographic situation has grown markedly complex, since North Ossetia's population was the second most dense in the whole of Russia, even before the current wave of immigration. Territorial claims by Checheno-Ingushetia are a destabilising factor. The scale of North Ossetia's problems are such that it cannot cope. We urge you to consider the situation in South Ossetia as a special case, and to institute measures to resolve the conflict and create conditions on the ground such that refugees can return to their homes".

At the same time, A. Galazov openly admitted that North Ossetia should not count on any real help from Soviet President Gorbachev, who had been in a trance-like state ever since the coup attempt against him in August 1991. Innumerable 'palace intrigues' complicated things further, arising from the fact that North Ossetia had largely supported the coup plotters and sent them telegrams of support "from collectives of workers". Its reaction was perfectly understandable, when Gorbachev's own unforgiveable criminal apathy had led to daily human casualties, for whom no one accepted responsibility in the country he led. Most people in North and South Ossetia saw the light of day on the evening of 19 August 1991 when the television showed the faces of the coup plotters. Georgian nationalists, notably, got a serious shock at that moment and anticipated reprisals. They kept their heads down and waited for the moment when they could be the first to send a congratulatory telegram to the winner of the whole hoo-ha. But after the outbreak of disturbances in Georgia in September 1991, they had other things on their minds.

There was no longer any point in talking with Soviet President Gorbachev, but the difficulty in talking with the Russian President was that he had drafted the Law On Rehabilitation, which still retained clauses about territorial restoration, thanks to the vigorous pro-Ingush parliamentary lobby, in the shape of G. Starovoitova and R. Khasbulatov. Nevertheless, from the very beginning Russia had given North Ossetia the most effective support in accepting and re-settling refugees. In February 1991, S. Khetagurov, the Chair of the North Ossetian Committee of Ministers met his Russian Republic counterpart I. Silaev, and described the situation in South Ossetia in detail. According to his data, the Autonomous Region had already sustained damage worth 110 million roubles, and there were more than 10,000 South Ossetian refugees in North Ossetia. S. Khetagurov appealed to the Russian Government for help – in the form of material assistance and food and financial resources, including 100 million roubles for reconstruction work in South Ossetia and 10 million roubles to help families in need. Reconstruction in South Ossetia mostly took the form of restoring the electricity supply. Other reconstruction at a time of war made no sense and so the assistance offered was in the form of humanitarian supplies and fuel. If it had bought weapons with this money, as Georgia claimed it had, the balance of military power could have substantially changed during this period. But the federal Union was protecting Georgia.

In September 1991, the Supreme Soviet of North Ossetia adopted a resolution "On Priority Measures to Assist Refugees from Georgia". It reflected clearly the importance that North Ossetia attached to solving these complex problems:

1. Assistance to refugees from Georgia is considered a priority for the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the Council of Ministers, and Ministries etc, particularly during the autumn and winter of 1991-1992.
2. Before 15 October, the Council of Ministers and a Supreme Soviet Working Group will take necessary steps to prepare accommodation and allocate it to refugees for the autumn and winter period.
3. Republican Trades Unions, and the North Ossetian Committee on TU holiday centres, are instructed to identify possible temporary accommodation for 900 refugees in the "Karmadon" and "Redant" sanatoria.
4. The Russian Republic Council of Ministers is requested to allocate additional food and other essential goods to North Ossetia in 1991-1992, to assist the refugees.
5. The USSR Supreme Soviet and the Russian Republic Supreme Soviet are requested to accelerate the drafting and adoption of a Law on Refugees.

According to the plan of the decree, the North Ossetian Government needed the following priority assistance:

1. The renovation of 4 housing blocks in the Buron settlement of Alagir district, to accommodate 600 refugees.
2. The renovation of a block of 30 flats in the Mizur settlement of Alagir district, to accommodate 120 people.
3. Renovation of a children's holiday camp run by the Alagir 'Resistance' factory, for 200 people.
4. Preparation of the Children's sanatorium in Nuzal settlement to receive 150 people.
5. The "Urson" tourist centre, for 320 refugees.
6. The tourist centre in Digor district, to take in 60 people.
7. A section of the children's recuperation camp "Shakhtyor", for 200 people.
8. Refurbishment and equipment of the former school in Tarski village as a dwelling for 100 refugees
9. Provision of food, goods and shopping vouchers to refugees.
10. Provision of free places in kindergarten for refugee children.
11. A request to the Rectors of North Ossetia's four main Institutes of Higher Education to consider accepting refugee students.
12. Resolution of all pensions and social benefits problems for refugees.
13. Provision of temporary work for refugees in vacancies available.
14. Arrangement of medical services where refugees live.
15. Exploration of the possibility of providing plots of land to refugees for house-building.
16. Re-registration of individuals arriving from South Ossetia and central districts of Georgia, and their provision with ID cards.

From the above, the scale of assistance was evidently enormous and this list represents only a fraction of what North Ossetia did for the refugees. Mostly, the public and authorities in outlying districts gave them spontaneous help, not counting the cost and without any decrees or bureaucratic delays. The refugees also received serious assistance from Dagestan, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Stavropol, Rostov and Kursk regions, Magadan, Abkhazia and the Ossetian Diasporas in Moscow and Leningrad.

Meanwhile, after a lull brought about by the April 1991 earthquake, the situation in South Ossetia became ever more complicated. The number of victims rose and villages were burned. Migration from South Ossetia throughout this period was two-way. Men would travel back to South Ossetia, after fixing up their families with relatives somewhere in North Ossetia. Women also tried to get back to South Ossetia out of concern for their husbands and brothers. 'Not knowing' was the hardest thing

for people who had left loved ones behind in the war. As they left Tskhinval, women and school children would agree to meet up, say, every Monday at some landmark in Vladikavkaz – usually on Peace Avenue. But actually there was no need to make a date. Women would come every day to what was known as the “Roundabout” at the entrance to the city, where a military helicopter regularly landed on the lawn, bringing in wounded from South Ossetia. They would scan the bodies lying on stretchers - terrified of seeing relatives or friends. There were cases when Ossetian women - from the North as well as the South - would run to give blood in the republican hospital if any of the injured needed it. It was here on the “Roundabout” that they got the latest news from Tskhinval, about who had been killed and who was injured, and where they could ask the medics accompanying the wounded whether they had seen so-and-so, or whether their house was still standing, or had been hit by rockets or shells. The fact it was impossible to buy a bandage or cotton wool at that time in any Vladikavkaz chemist shop is eloquent proof of the number of people being injured in South Ossetia at that time. Many chemists would hang signs on their window saying “We have nothing for bandaging.” Everything had gone south. By winter, people expected the number of refugees to rise to 100 thousand.

On 26 April 1991 the Russian Parliament adopted a Law “On the Rehabilitation of Suppressed Peoples”. Only 10 years had passed since the eruptions in Ordzhonikidze on 26-29 October 1981 during a sharp flare-up of the Ingush-Ossetian conflict. In April 1991 the first armed clashes occurred that led to the deaths of several people in Kurtat village of North Ossetia, and the maiming and injury of many others. On 20 June 1991 a Republic of Ingushetia was proclaimed within the Russian Federated Soviet of Socialist Republics. Its parliament unanimously voted Zviad Gamsakhurdia an Honorary Citizen and an Honorary Member of the republic’s Executive Body, at which its Chairman, I. Kodzoyev, observed: “The Ingush people believe the Republic of Georgia cannot remain indifferent to their tragic fate.”

The arrival of each new refugee family from Georgia to the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia exacerbated tension, because the Ingush looked on the district as theirs. The refugees altered the demographic balance of North Ossetia and increased the proportion of Ossetians then in the population. On 1 November 1992 6,654 people in the Prigorodny district had fled from South Ossetia and Georgia. Fanatics appeared who were ready to play the Ingush-Ossetian card and drum up allies. And “anti-Ossetian solidarity”, of course, already drew the Ingush and Georgians together.

At that same time North Ossetian law enforcement agencies noted that the appearance of the refugees had led to a spike in the crime figures. High-ranking militia men reported that “some of them are doing things against Georgians, like phoning them up at home and writing threats to kidnap their children. There have been attempts to form military detachments of local young people, block gas pumping stations, and switch off energy supplies to Georgia. A number of serious crimes have been carried out. Two juveniles were arrested a few days ago on suspicion of carrying out three burglaries. There have been armed attacks on apartments, many incidents of hooliganism and indecent behaviour in the streets and other public places.” For tiny North Ossetia with the highest population density in the North Caucasus, the inflow of refugees had created acute problems.

While they were in Vladikavkaz, the refugees received ration cards for their next month’s shopping. The great majority of them were without work and on social welfare. Those without jobs had a standard excuse: “I’ll just register my address then I’ll start working” – although a fixed address was not required of them and factories and offices could hire them, exceptionally, on the basis of their refugee ID card and without being registered. Many went to work in the fields. People from the same village would form their own work brigade - it was easier to cope with their new situation that way. But most refugees still remained on state support.

An argument in the letters’ page of the Vladikavkaz newspaper “The Word” was typical of the period. It was between readers who were in favour of sending armed units to help Ossetians in the south,

and those who thought that male refugees cooling their heels in Vladikavkaz should be the ones to go and fight. This is a representative commentary by D. Dzattseev. He writes: "R. Dzattiata suggests that North Ossetia should entangle itself in a civil war with Georgia, supposedly to prevent bloodshed in the Caucasus. He is extremely naïve to think there are any winners in a civil war. The thoughts he expresses in his letter are being voiced by many people and, unofficially, young people in North Ossetia are being called to take up arms and head for a liberation struggle over the mountains. Meanwhile there are well over 1,000 fit and healthy young men 'from over there' already in Vladikavkaz, aimlessly hanging around the city streets, to put it mildly. Before you start inciting North Ossetia's young people to fight, maybe you should address the deserters who abandoned the struggle? 'The Word' was the first paper to openly favour the creation of republican armed detachments - but they should be purely defensive. Many people think that any attempt at extremism on our part can lead only to a sharp change in public opinion, which is currently against the Georgian government. However hard it may be, we must have no truck with emotion and think things through rationally. A war with the Georgian government will lead to war with the Georgian people, and we should not permit reprisals against individual ethnic Georgians here amongst us either. It is disgraceful to project your own grief and sense of injustice onto innocent people. In the last month alone, several voluntary groups have gone to South Ossetia to render various forms of assistance. Yet at the same time here in North Ossetia a cohort of many hundred refugees or, if you like, men who ran away from the field of battle, are busy doing nothing. Doesn't Tskhinval need the help of this huge cohort, more than it needs bread? We don't like it when thousands of real men who are at the barricades and ready to die rather than let armed thugs into their city, are spoken of in one breath with the gang of fat-faced bastards living it up here."

Perhaps this was simply the gripe of one man who thought he was under no obligation to go and fight in this damnable war and wanted to vent his irritation at appeals to his honour and sense of duty. Conscience evidently preyed on D. Dzattseev, but it is clear too that he did not fully appreciate the scale of the tragedy when he called it "a string of bad luck". He wrote: "All of us are depressed at the moment and dogged by a string of bad luck. Even something as trivial and apparently unconnected to events in South Ossetia - like footballer Valery Gazzaev's departure for Moscow's 'Dynamo' team - is demoralising and adds to our depression. We believe our recent unlucky streak will definitely come to an end. There is no need for mutual incrimination. We need to ensure that the people fated by their destiny or duty, also fight for the truth."

Research carried out after the end of the armed phase of the conflict, shows that refugees from central Georgia adapted worst to their new conditions – especially people who had previously tried to adapt to life in a Georgian milieu by changing their surname, speaking Georgian and putting their children through Georgian schools. Apart from everything else, these people took the tragedy personally: even all this had not been enough to make them safe, and they had been forced to leave the place they thought of as home. There were even rumours that provocateurs had been specially sent to North Ossetia to stir up hostility between Georgians and Ossetians and provoke conflict that would create problems for people in the north.

The radical press criticised the North Ossetian government for sitting on its hands and caring too much about local Georgians. Articles of this sort also appeared in the Moscow-based federal press. "Pravda" carried a report around that time of the forcible eviction of women, old men and children from a hostel in the summer of 1991, because 'the refugees should go back to South Ossetia'. This was unjustified, when it was a known fact that by far most refugees came from central Georgia and so could not go back, with the best will in the world. The Deputy Head of Migration Affairs for the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, D. Kulumbegov, admitted that Special Purpose Militia had assisted some forcible evictions of refugees (a process known as 'de-settlement') and some elderly refugees from Georgia were even evicted from the old people's homes, where they had lived since they arrived. But the buildings could indeed have needed urgent repairs.

At a psychological level, refugees from South Ossetia coped with their situation more easily: sooner or later they were bound to go back home. Be it reduced to ashes, they would still be with their own people. Refugees from Georgia did not have that hope. For them, the South Ossetian problem was to decide whether or not to be an independent Republic of South Ossetia or just an autonomous part of Georgia. Their problem, however, was that they represented an 'alien', non-Georgian, race.

Yu. Biragov, the Deputy Chair of the North Ossetian Parliament, admitted that Ossetian refugees from central Georgia faced the greatest problems. He said: "unlike South Ossetian women who are planning to go back to their own homes, the refugees from Georgia's hinterland are here for keeps. At the moment they are saying nothing, but in the days to come we must work flat out to find them jobs and housing. If we can manage at least some employment – there are around 5,000 vacancies each year and roughly another 3,000 opening in new small businesses – the situation with land and housing is much more complicated. North Ossetia has a land shortage and extremely weak building capacity. Here we hope for help from Russia, and the Union". He characterised the refugees as an unpredictable element that could influence ethnic relations within North Ossetia itself, with its population of 13 thousand Georgians. "At the moment, we are doing everything to minimise tension. Communist Party workers, parliamentarians, members of informal public organisations are doing a lot of informational outreach with the public, and Georgian homes and flats have been fitted with security. But that is for now. What might happen tomorrow is hard to predict, especially if the conflict in South Ossetia escalates and new waves of refugees come over the mountains."

You could not expect perfect behaviour from people who had been through trauma of this kind. They had lost their homes and now they were nobody. G. Pavlovets researched this problem in his study of "The Specific Ethno-Psychology of Refugees from South Ossetia and central Georgia". He also found that in the post-conflict stage, local willingness to help the refugees metamorphosed into indifference. But at the height of the conflict, local people merely stared at them, recognising them by the way they spoke, their manners and their customs.

"One thing is clear: when successful people turn into refugees, it is not only their material stability that collapses. They also go through a crisis of identity which every refugee expresses differently", Pavlovets writes. "Refugees have high defence mechanisms to protect their ego. They do not focus on obstacles, or on satisfying their demands - they concentrate on protecting their own particular "I", and this they do, not by criticising outsiders, but by going inwards. They are exceptionally vulnerable and inclined to view difficulties and obstacles as a direct threat, not a stimulus to finding solutions. To make the transition from psychological, defensive, passivity to looking for realistic solutions to their problems, they definitely need external psychological support and psychotherapy. How would most people behave if they suffered the psychological stress of turning overnight from prosperous residents of Georgia into humiliated, marginalised people? There has been a cardinal shift in their identity. Refugees feel excluded from the main vital relationships that society offers. Research findings show that half the refugees questioned categorise themselves as down-and-outs; unemployed; poverty-stricken; second-class; superfluous; without rights, and defenceless".

Many other pieces of research note the high degree of "cultural marginalisation" among refugees. Having lived for many generations in Georgia, Ossetians could adapt to a Georgian cultural milieu, and had mastered Georgian cultural habits and traditions that could not fail to be reflected in their outlook. Once they were in North Ossetia, they could not change, because they knew no other way of behaving. This irritated local Ossetians who thought that refugees from Georgia should now hate all things Georgian. Indeed, 'ethnic tolerance for Georgians visibly dipped' among refugees from central Georgia, and they would call them 'enemies' and 'aggressors', 'arrogant' and 'hypocritical'. But on the strength of the customs they had acquired, they continued living "like Georgians". This observation does not apply to Ossetians from districts where they lived in large separate communities, e.g. in the Gujareti Gorge in Georgia's Borjomi district, and in several villages of Kakheti. They stayed loyal to Ossetian traditions and culture.

Of course, one category of refugees merits a different critique, and is described in A. Galazov's book "The Experience of Suffering". He writes: "Among the refugees are many ex-Communist Party activists and representatives of the 'intelligentsia', who found patrons for themselves in North Ossetia, Moscow and Leningrad. They settled quite comfortably and took care of their children's future. Some were politically active and would hold strange get-togethers in Moscow, then phone the North Ossetian government with blueprints for solving the South Ossetian question".

In October –December 1991 about 50% of the Ossetian population of Georgia and South Ossetia were refugees. According to official statistics that TV reporter Irina Tabolova quoted in a broadcast on 4 October: "More than 220 people had been murdered, including women and children. 480 were wounded and 112 had disappeared. Refugees from other parts of Georgia were being registered in Tskhinval: about 1,000 children aged 6 and younger; 1,375, aged between six and 16; 3,000 people aged between 16 and 50; and between 50 -3,000 older people. In South Ossetia, the population had stayed at around 50,000. Ossetians had been deported from 94 villages. This was genocide baring its teeth. There is no other word for it."

Later in the same piece, Tabolova continued: "There was a traffic jam of vehicles in Dzau heading for Tskhinval, among the passengers quite a few people who had decided to break with their painful refugee status and come back home with their children. An unaccompanied car was hijacked and its two occupants were taken hostage. A bus travelling from Grom village in South Ossetia under USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs escort was fired on and brought to a halt. Arkady Dudaev was murdered and Vadim Chochiev and Murtaz Khamatov and their outriders were seriously wounded. A unit from the Ministry of Internal Affairs came to the rescue, but too late. In the hospital we saw Vardi Tabueva, from Znaur village. Sadists had stabbed her, then held a fuel injector to her face and set it alight".

Some refugees found only dust and ash where their homes had once been. Many of them knew their houses were no longer standing, but they were still drawn back by a mixture of hope and distress. Some could not bear what they saw. When Georgian vigilantes burst into Artsev in September 1991, Second World War veteran Shaliko Bolataev managed to escape with a group of other villagers. He came back when things had quietened down, but when he saw what the bandits had done to his village, his heart gave out and he died on the spot. He was buried on 17 September.

Georgian armed gangs were attacking villages and stealing agricultural goods from the farms, right at the start of the conflict. They soon switched to private homes, and looted some of them several times. Then they started torching the villages they had plundered. More often than not, small villages did not have their own people to defend them - they could not sit on the look-out for attack, each in their own village. There was a catastrophic shortage of firepower, and villagers were even shy to ask for protection. The villages of Didmukha and Mugut in Znaur district of South Ossetia were cheek-by-jowl with the Georgian village of Auneu, but their residents still held out and stubbornly refused to leave for Tskhinval, or the North. There were houses that had been looted 6 or 7 times, while their owners were hit and humiliated. At last the residents asked for help and the next time the looters came to call, they walked into an ambush. Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs also turned up soon after. When it was all over, the locals collected up 14 corpses from the street - bodies of their recent attackers - piled them into cars and drove them to the outskirts of the village. The Georgian media painted this as an "Ossetian extremist attack on peaceful Auneu village". The Georgian vigilantes soon realised that just looting villages was not enough and in April, 18 villages in Znaur district virtually ceased to exist: Balta, Kalet, Veleebi, Ioncha and others. In the wake of this terror, villagers abandoned another 36 in the area. People continued living only in Znaur and Bekmar. The other villages were deserted.

It says much, that during two years of armed conflict no Georgian villages were burned down, - or ever have been.

Ossetian villagers would remove their belongings and cattle even from villages that Georgian vigilantes had yet to invade. This meant there was a constant procession of cars, loaded with stuff, and noisy with the lowing and bellowing of hungry cattle, along the main Znaur-Tskhinval road. The Georgians would immediately slaughter any cows that had not been driven away, so their owners were left with nothing. People carried off their smallest lambs in their arms. More than 500 head of village cattle were moved out of the farm in Velit village alone, not counting the villagers' own private cows. The villagers managed to escape before they were invaded. The Ossetian Home Guard came to help and found the village ablaze. They managed to rescue a puppy, took it home and nicknamed it "Refugee". Some of the livestock rescued from other villages like Prineu, was successfully herded over to Bekmar where it pastured under the open sky. For a long time the cows went hungry, because there was a shortage of feed.

It was a similar picture in Tskhinval district, where Georgian and Ossetian villages were more densely interspersed. The Ossetian village of Khelchua emptied, after several days' trying to defend itself. On 25 March 1992, its guard was worn out by the constant barrage of gunfire and gave up, taking the women and children with them. Only old men were left. They were unable to leave the village and thought they were too old and infirm to pose a threat to the Georgians. Next morning vigilantes burst in and encountered no resistance. 90-year-old Nestor Gobozov described how "the village had been torched once in the 1920s, but here it was, happening again." There were about 220 houses and they were all, without exception, burned down to ground and the elderly villagers were murdered: Sergey Khugaev, Nina Bestaeva, Germanoz Kisiev. Vladimir Khugaev and Sakino Kisiev, two old men with gunshot wounds were driven to the hospital – Kisiev was an invalid with a fractured spine, who could only move on crutches; 85-year-old Kargo Bestaev; 75-year-old Tadeusz Kisiev, 80-year-old Tekle Kaziev, and 90-year-old Sanet Kudzieva-Kisieva. She was savagely beaten and a finger was cut off her hand. She died shortly afterwards.

Three villagers were taken captive: Goga Bestaev; Gigutsa Kisiev and Beto Kisiev. After torturing the old people with a blow lamp (and cutting of G. Kisiev's right hand), the bandits tipped them into the ravine. Internal Troops of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs rescued their corpses only a few days later.

Sakino Kisiev says: "A few people came in and told me to get out onto the roof. I got to my feet with great difficulty and with the help of crutches went out onto the porch. When they saw me, they began shooting and got me in the shoulder. I fell down, and the thugs began doing me over, and stamping on me with their feet. I passed out and when I came to, I heard terrifying sounds: sobbing; cattle bellowing; wood splintering. I looked around me and saw the house and cow shed ablaze. The animals were on fire, but who could spare a thought for them! Next morning the vigilantes came back again and carried on with their arson and pillage. At midday, soldiers from the 'Emergency Service' arrived and drove us to the hospital."

Sanet Kudzieva-Kisieva describes how: "They took me out into the yard and asked me where my husband was. I said he died in the Second World War, at which they suddenly started beating me up. I would drop to the ground, then they would drag me up onto my feet again and start hitting me again. This went on a long time. Then one of them noticed the gold ring on my finger, and pointed it out to the others. They tried pulling it off but it would not budge. Then they started sawing at my fingers, and cut off my thumb completely. Next morning they came back and again beat me up before setting fire to my house."⁷

⁷ Quoted in 'Soviet Ossetia, No 32, 1991

The murder of elderly people in half-deserted villages was the attackers' hall-mark. They felt quite at home and intoxicated by the fact they would go unpunished. Most elderly people, nevertheless, still refused to leave the villages because they feared being a burden to their family. In Monaster village in Tskhinval district, brothers Zakhar and Sergey Khugaev were murdered, when they were 66 and 64 years old respectively. A villager from Nogkæu, 87-year-old Iosif Kaziev, was taken captive in Cheri village when he was visiting his daughter. He was taken out in sub-zero temperatures, stripped, and forced under gunfire into the river. He died three days later.

Georgians who attacked Tliakana village on 2 April, sadistically murdered 82-year-old Georgy Kulumbegov; 70 year-old Taisia Dzhabieva, 70-year-old Nadya Tsakhilova and 80-year-old Katya Kumsieva. They shot them dead, then set fire to their bodies. Nadya Tsakhilova's head was blown off with the force of the automatic round. Her husband, Ilyusha Kulumbegov was the only survivor out of the entire village. He had gone to gather logs in the forest, shortly before the attack began. The bandits set fire to the whole village and neighbours from nearby Budzhitykæu buried the victims in their own cemetery. That same day, Eltura village was burned down.

On 15 May 1992, Georgians burst into Sarabuk village, broke into houses and rounded up the old people. They shot dead Pepo Lolaeva, who was 81. Everything wooden in the village had been set on fire, so there were no wooden boards and she was buried without a coffin. At Sarabuk too, they shot dead Egti and Navroz Kumaritov, and Anichka Kumaritova-Alborova (80). A little while later they came back and broke in again, murdering another old man, Nikolai Tsakhilov. The survivors made for Tskhinval by forest trails.

If they were ill or infirm, there was no point in old people fleeing their villages – the journey would have been beyond them – and many consigned themselves to certain death with the defiant sense that: "If they murder me, more shame on them". 80-year-old Plion (Plieva) from Mamitykæu village describes how: "from early December 1990 we slept out in the forest nearly every night. Armed Georgian mobs were breaking into our homes, carrying out pogroms and threatening to wipe us all out. Among the thugs we saw Zubashvili, the teacher in Kheit school, and a Georgian jeweller who worked in Tskhinval.

There were only old people left in the village. We met up and were planning to spend the night in Shota Mamiev's house, which was one of the few still intact. On 23 January we were 15 women and 3 old men. 15 thugs burst in, stood us against the wall and began firing above our heads, and into the wall space between us. They rolled 96-year-old Ladi Mamiev and disabled Khazbi Mamiev out of their beds and started hitting them. They stuck the barrel of their automatic rifle into Khazbi's mouth and threatened him they would shoot. Then they locked us in, set fire to the building, and went off round the village. We managed to put out the fire with something, clambered out of the first floor, and ran off into the woods. We left three people behind in the house – a disabled girl, and the two men, Ladi and Khazbi. When the marauders came back a little while later, they were incensed to find the fire out and the old women gone. They hit the two old men and the girl, threw them out in the frost then set fire to everything around them. We could hear them scream and moan, but how could we help them? We sat out the whole night in the forest on the snow.

Another time they went into Sarabi Kozaev's house and spotted a tub of fresh pork – which they fouled, then strewed with broken glass. Quite often when they were dividing up their spoils, the thugs would fall out and start fighting each other, or even drawing their guns.

Oh Lord, I am a religious woman. I curse everyone who has so lost their humanity they have no mercy even on old people, invalids, children and women. May God be their Judge!" This was how 80-year-old Plion concluded her account.⁸

On 15 April there were 86 villages of this type in South Ossetia. In Georgian villages and in Tskhinval, 80 Ossetian houses were burned down all told – according to information provided by the Georgian side. In Tskhinval itself, 33 old people died of hypothermia in an old people's home in January 1991 during the first 10 days of the war. Georgian technicians cut off the electricity supply to South Ossetia. The old people's home was not in the part of town occupied by the Georgian militia, but in the chaos and shock of the first days of war, perhaps there was no one to spare a thought for old people with no families.

When they attacked the villages, the Georgian vigilantes did not cart the old people off to Megvrekisi village in Gori district, where they had an HQ. They would exchange brief words with them, and whisper the story of Erdi Khubaev, who was murdered most horribly while he was making the sign of the cross. They decapitated the blind 90-year-old from Eredvi in Tskhinval district. To be honest it is hard to credit this nightmarish story, but witnesses have come forward who saw it.

Story No 5. The Old Man



Leila Tuaeva went to the funeral of the old man who had been murdered. Tuaeva is a refugee from Eredvi who now lives in a Compact Refugee Centre: SPTU-131. She says: "Four of us lived in Eredvi: my parents, my brother and I. The night before war broke out my parents had gone up to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia and could not get back when the fighting started. Before then, my brother had gone to Stavropol in southern Russia, and I was at home alone. I was 16 years old and very frightened. I stayed the night with relatives and sometimes ran home to check on the cows. People were afraid to go outside even in daylight, but at dusk Ossetian women tried to get together and pass on the news they'd heard. That night a neighbour invited Erdi Khubaev's daughters and daughters-in-law to join other Ossetian villagers at her house. The old man was already asleep, and the women closed the door and left him. How long could they have been away, before they went back? Probably two hours maximum. When they got home they found the front door had been smashed. The old man had been murdered and was lying on the floor in a terrible position. Most likely it was neighbours who murdered him because they knew he was on his own, and there were scarcely any Ossetian men left in Eredvi: the men were in the first line of danger and tried all they could to keep as far away from the village as possible. Probably the old man Erdi ended up paying for all of them. His arms were badly slashed – he had grabbed an axe and tried to put up a fight!

One day, a few days after his funeral, our Georgian neighbours put us all in a vehicle and drove us to Tskhinval, where there was another Georgian police precinct. They drove the four of us women round in a "Volga" car and insisted we tell the Ossetians that "We

⁸ Quoted in the "South Ossetian Herald", No 10, 91.

don't want the Soviet Army in South Ossetia". They drove us to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where we found a huge crowd of Ossetian men from the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, who had been similarly bussed in to tell Tskhinval residents that "We do not want to take Russia's side." We were then driven back to Eredvi. Sometime later a cousin came for me from Tbilisi and dispatched me to North Ossetia via Baku in Azerbaijan."

Leyla went back to South Ossetia with her parents and got a room in hostel SPTU-131 in Tsvinkhal. Here in the hostel four years later she married a refugee from Znaur district, but soon afterwards they divorced. Her husband left and she stayed behind with two children, the youngest of whom, Vladik Gagloyev, suffers from infantile cerebral palsy. The boy needs treatment but this is not possible on a disability allowance of 1,500 roubles.

In Leningor district in South Ossetia, Ossetians were likewise expelled from all the villages with mixed populations. Leningor's isolation from most of South Ossetia made the Ossetian villagers easy pickings for bandit groups. The settlement of Bershueti in Gori district adjoins Tsinagar village in Leningor district. On 28 April 1991 a handful of armed Georgians from Bershueti herded away the cattle from Tsinagar pastures. Tsinagar villagers ran to the spot and were ambushed. In the cross-fire that broke out, Otar Khubulov, Tengiz Dudaev, Temo Khubulov, Slavik Chertkoyev, Givi Bibilov, Zaur Khubulov and Totryr Margiev were killed. Dozens of others were wounded, and three Georgians also died.

In October, even rural schools became refugees *en masse*. When the new academic year began on 1 October 1991, senior schools from Otreu and Artseu were temporarily based in Tskhinval, because teachers and pupils were unable to go back to their razed villages. Some of the pupils from these schools were already studying in North Ossetian schools, where parents had tried to enrol them in time for the school year. The number of refugees was already creating perceptible problems for North Ossetian life and particularly in its capital, Vladikavkaz. The head of the North Ossetian Government, S Khetagurov, encouraged them to settle in rural locations outside the capital and in parts of the Republic with employment vacancies in State farms, or businesses.

The political crisis that had begun brewing in Tbilisi in September 1991 made the situation even more difficult in South Ossetia. The opposing sides – made up of the Zviadist government and its opposition – called for a united front against the enemy Ossetians. On 26 September, armed Special Purpose militia broke up an opposition demonstration demanding the President's resignation, and there were fatalities. Dr Giya Abesadze immolated himself in an attempt to reconcile opposing Georgians. The National Guard, led by Tengiz Kitovani, refused to obey Zviad Gamsakhurdia and occupied the Radio and Television building. The conflict was a response to recent presidential decrees reorganising the National Guard; creating a National Security Council; and introducing a State of Emergency in Tbilisi - all without parliamentary confirmation. This was a usurpation of power.

On 22 December T. Sigua and T. Kitovani led the storming of the Government. "The most amazing thing was that they fired on innocent people - women, young people and children – and did it during the pre-Christmas fast" - as the official Georgian news agency reported. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's

supporters called for civil disobedience. Between 22 December and 6 January, in Tbilisi at least 107 people died in the conflict. A list of the fatalities was published.

After deposing Zviad Gamsakhurdia the Military Council – and mainly Dzhaba Ioseliani – freed Torez Kulumbegov from jail and urged South Ossetian leaders to stop their resistance and come to Tbilisi for negotiations. But the war in South Ossetia was continuing unabated and no one had any intention of coming to Tbilisi for talks. The Head of the Provisional Government, Tengiz Sigua, announced that ex-President Gamsakhurdia's supporters had renewed shooting in Tskhinval and the countryside, intent on destroying peace negotiations with Ossetia.

As for the ex-president, the Head of the Provisional Government Tengiz Sigua noted he was "unlikely to stand trial since he was 'psychologically unbalanced', which had been borne out by documentary proof and medical testimony." Nevertheless the Georgian Procuracy initiated a criminal case against him for inciting inter-ethnic hatred and stealing state property on an especially large scale etc.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia fled to Armenia - but perhaps not over the Akhalkalaki mountains on foot? - and found temporary shelter with the Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who had sent him an invitation. The Armenian Opposition objected that he had invited a tyrant to the country, but President Ter-Petrosyan thought this was the only way to stop a fratricidal war in Georgia and stabilise the situation throughout the Caucasus. Gamsakhurdia received 'shelter' but not political asylum. From Armenia, the ex-president embarked for Sukhum, whence he was driven at night by car to Zugdidi in Abkhazia. The very next day he mounted a demonstration and urged his supporters to march on Tbilisi. And announced the start of a civil war.

Eduard Shevardnadze had been kicking his heels since leaving the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He welcomed the "democratic revolution" in Georgia and declared that he had a great desire to participate in the creation of a democratic Georgia. "What role I shall play – let the current leaders of the democracy movement decide." This was his gift to the newly declared 'democrats' and meant that soon the whole world would regard them the way the universally-recognised 'democrat' Shevardnadze did.

But in a popular referendum in South Ossetia on 19 January 1992, 99% of the population voted for independence from Georgia and unification with the Russian Federation. To expect a peaceable reaction from the new Georgian authorities was naïve. The National Guard was for the time being wrapped up in its own problems in western Georgia, but armed gangs at the grassroots were incensed at the referendum. Rumours abounded in Tskhinval that Georgian vigilantes were planning to seize the Roki Tunnel, cut South Ossetia off from Russian help in the North and hold the population hostage. The tunnel, that was previously guarded by Russian troops had recently been left unguarded – which fuelled the rumours. Fortunately the "hostile special detachments" turned out to be an armed Ossetian group from Kvaisa which took the tunnel under guard.

At the same time that the fighting was reaching its peak in January 1992, residents of the neighbouring districts in Georgia were able to buy groceries in Tskhinval where they were significantly cheaper. Of course, this spoke volumes for Ossetia's greater ethnic tolerance, but it was also evidence that spivs had appeared in the city, who charged a percentage for their services as middlemen. Even so, prices in Tskhinval were 2-3 times lower than in Gori and Tbilisi. Georgians shipped out so many goods from besieged Tskhinval that a customs post was organised on the Ossetian-Georgian border. Within a few days the post had blocked attempts to transport more than 100 kg of cheese, 300 kg of meat, beans, potatoes, and even items of humanitarian aid, out of the city. People wanted the speculators severely punished, and said they were "traitors" at a time when South Ossetia was under an economic blockade from Georgia.

Rumours were one thing, but reports that a Confederation of Mountain Peoples might support South Ossetia turned out to be true. As this was not part of either Georgia or Moscow's plan, special units of Trans-Caucasus Internal Troops were allowed to mount an operation blocking off the Roki Tunnel, and so preclude significant military assistance to Ossetians in the south. As expected, the behaviour of the Russian party to the conflict visibly changed as soon as Eduard Shevardnadze appeared on the Georgian scene. On 25 April 1992 Internal Troops of the Soviet Internal Affairs Ministry left the "Ossetia" Tourist Centre and withdrew from South Ossetia altogether, doing so secretly, overnight. Large weapons consignments earmarked for military units were handed over to the Georgian side and the war entered its bloodiest phase. Georgian National Guard units took the place of the vigilante groups.

The number of refugees streaming along the "Road to Life" via Zaur gained even more momentum – until 20 May, when it dried up.

On 20 May 1992 at 11.45 am, Georgian armed groups massacred peaceful civilians in a savage attack on a transport column on the Tskhinval-Zar-Dzau road. The victims were women, children and old people, on their way to North Ossetia. 33 people were shot dead by a gun to the head, where they sat in their cars. According to information at the disposal of criminal investigators, a Georgian sabotage group from Kekhvi village carried out the massacre.

"Ossetian blood flowed in streams down the Zar Mountains to Chreba⁹. Our bloodthirsty neighbours executed every single one of those weary refugees. The hospital forecourt was piled with blood-soaked bodies. Every corner of Chreba echoed to the sound of grieving... Weep Ossetians! Ossetians pay their respects with tears!" So said the mourners, such was the weeping, when they commemorated the people who had died on the Zar road. It reflected the grief and the fear that gripped people in both north and south Ossetia in those days.

The following people were murdered:

1.	Igko Padoyevich Laliev	1919
2.	Moska Alexeevich Kokoyev	1925
3.	Vardo Grigorievna Dzhioyeva	1925
4.	Zaur Vasilievich Alborov	1928
5.	Georgy Biboyevich Ostaev	1929
6.	Soslan Davidovich Kumartiov	1933
7.	Georgy Alexeyeevich Dzhioyev	1933
8.	Nazirat Sarbegovna Kochieva	1936
9.	Vladimir Ektievich Bitiev	1936
10.	Vasily Georgievich Gagloyev	1939
11.	Georgy Kharitonovich Tseboyeve	1942
12.	Irina Ilinichna Alborova-Kochieva	1947
13.	Zemfira Vaznoyevna Dzhioyeva-Bestaeva	1947
14.	Vitaly Sergeevich Kachmazov	1949
15.	Viktor Dimitrievich Kabisov	1949
16.	Ruslan Anatolievich Chibirov	1950
17.	Natalya Georgievna Tseboyeve	1950
18.	Khadizat Zakharovna Gassieva	1951
19.	Evgeniya Vasilievna Dzeranova	1951
20.	Zemfira Viktorovna Siukaeva	1953
21.	Ermak Eliazovich Chochiev	1957
22.	Andrey Malikoyevich Dzhioyev	1960

⁹ The old name for Tskhinval - author

23.	Svetlana Zaurovna Kokoyeva	1962
24.	Mairbek Rubenovich Tedeev	1962
25.	Stanislav Ivanovich Dzhioyev	1962
26.	Irina Gavrilovna Gagloyeva	1963
27.	Sergey Taymurazovich Kairov	1963
28.	Valentina Romanovna Kochieva	1964
29.	Albert Ivanovich Byazrov	1967
30.	Leonid Ilich Kokoyev	1971
31.	Ludmila Matveevna Bazyrova	1972
32.	Batradz Khazbievich Kabisov	1 September 1981
33.	Vasily Alexandrovich Kokoyev	

Story No 6: Death on the “Road to Life”

“The morning of 20 May gave no indication that anything extraordinary was about to happen. There was the usual scene in a town under blockade: loaves of bread that vanished from the shops in an instant; young men walking round with guns; and refugees waiting for any transport to take them away. It was a grey, windy morning and absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. And they are only saying that the night before, the icon of Our Lady shed tears...”

The testimony of Arina Tengizovna Besaeva, 23 years old:

-We were loaded into the back of a lorry covered with tarpaulin. There were a lot of us, about 40-50, and we travelled standing up because it was too crowded to sit. A little after the village of Zar, the vehicle came to a halt and we waited for the ‘traffic jam’ to ease. We moved off and started climbing further into the mountains. There was a mist and of course it was impossible to see through the tarpaulin – anyway it never entered anyone’s head to look out and check for Georgian vigilantes en route. Because until then everyone had been certain that this road belonged to us and was completely safe.

Rounds of automatic gunfire hit us simultaneously on both sides and perhaps from the front too. I thought that because the lorry had stopped dead, the driver had most likely been killed – but before I had time to put this thought into words, blood-soaked people began toppling on top of me. No one screamed. No one had time. At some point I thought that I had probably died too and could not remember where I had been wounded. I lay under a pile of corpses and tried to think. From the volume of gunfire I worked out that many people were shooting – probably more than 20. The barrage carried on for about 10 minutes, then very suddenly fell silent. Somewhere to my left a little girl was crying and a muffled woman’s voice begged her to be quiet. From outside, a strong male voice shouted in Georgian: ‘Right, get out!’ and unleashed another round at the vehicle. Then someone shouted: ‘Quick. He’s going!’ – and I heard the sound of feet departing quickly. The wounded started moving under the dead bodies, and quietly slipping out of the lorry. I saw one man running away to one side of the lorry. He wore boots and an automatic rifle over his shoulder, and I could see a white pullover under his camouflage jacket.

The testimony of Marina Borisovna Plieva and Lyubov Vladimirovna Nanieva:

- Miraculously, the young man who was dragging us out from under the bodies was completely unhurt: not even a scratch. He dragged out his younger brother and helped us down, then we walked, or rather ran as fast as we could, away from that ghastly lorry. Terror made us run faster and we didn’t even feel our injuries. But another man clambered down from the lorry, or rather tumbled out of it. You could not make out where he had been wounded: he was all

covered in blood. He took one step, collapsed immediately, and never got up again. We ran past the 1940s 'Willis' lorry, all riddled with bullet holes. A very young man with a stomach wound was clinging to it. He shouted to us to send help, because there were still survivors in the lorry, but he evidently he expended his last energy on shouting, and fell to the ground, flat on his face. Heavens, it seemed a baby was crying in the lorry!

The testimony of Emzar Iosifovich Gagloyev, aged 21:

- *I glimpsed them a few seconds before they opened fire. They were in camouflage jackets with their arms at the ready, and of course I thought they were on our side, since they were standing there so plain to see. The first round hit our 'Willis' lorry from the front, and killed Ira instantaneously. I managed to throw Astemir to the floor and at that very second several machine guns strafed the sides of the lorry. My stomach and shoulder injuries were not fatal. I had hold of my child and pinned him to the floor with my whole body. Astik didn't cry. He drowned out the gunfire, shouting that he was cold, that his feet were freezing and that he wanted his mummy, and other stuff. I didn't have the strength to clamp his mouth shut and meanwhile he carried on shouting and the machine guns drilled and drilled the lorry. All of a sudden, Astemir fell silent, the firing stopped, and I lost consciousness. I came to with my son pulling my hair, and saying something. From his muttering I understood his feet had warmed up and that his mother was probably dead. And warm blood was oozing and trickling through his little trousers and down his legs. While I tried to get out of the lorry, he crawled over the blood-soaked passengers, listening to their dying gasps, putting an ear to their chest and saying every so often: 'Uncle Zhora is alive. He's breathing. But Vasya is already dead.' Several times he asked me not to die and leave him all alone.*

At last I managed to roll out of the lorry, and used a door to lever myself onto my feet. I had to crawl over to the back. Some bloke seemed to be saying something about a hand grenade he had brought with him. I seemed to take 1,000 years to get there, and passed out several times.

As I came round I heard a vehicle approach from the direction of Dzau. I lifted an arm and shouted for help. The vehicle stopped. The two men sitting inside it were chatting in Ossetic and looked at me doubtfully. Astik was crying. I pointed at the 'Willis' lorry and explained that there were survivors on board that needed to rescuing. Probably I looked just like a corpse myself, because suddenly something completely inexplicable happened: the vehicle turned round and accelerated back towards Dzau. I watched it go, its registration number dancing before my eyes. It was a grey, old model, 'Volga'. It would have been better if I had died. Next time, I came round to the sound of an Armoured Carrier and was terrified the Georgians had come back. Soldiers ran over to me, lifted me and carried me in their arms. Familiar features, familiar Ossetic language. I felt safe, and at the same time overcome with exhaustion, revulsion and unconcern. I felt I did not want to live any more".¹⁰

On 10 June 1991, South Ossetian leaders A. Galazov and S. Khetagurov met Eduard Shevardnadze and his new Defence Minister T. Kitovani, in Kazbegi. Galazov was pinning hopes on Shevardnadze to 'resolve the conflict', as it was now the fashion to call the war. Shevardnadze described the massacre of refugees on 20 May as 'war against one's own people, and an urge to shed as much blood as possible so as to bring a fascist regime to power on a wave of anarchy and chaos'. In a statement on behalf of the State Council, its Chairman confirmed that he would not tolerate fascism, which was alien to the Georgian nature, and that Georgia would cleanse this dark stain on its name".

¹⁰ From "The Herald of South Ossetia", No 7, 1992

A little later, in an address to a crowd of several thousand people in Gori, Shevardnadze admitted that “Georgia had wronged the Ossetians” and on its behalf begged Ossetians to forgive the blood that had been spilled and the sufferings caused. Among other decisions taken at the Kazbegi meeting was one to “devise an integrated plan for the return of refugees to their permanent homes before the onset of the cold weather”.

That same day while negotiations were underway, military stockpiles in Mikhailovsky village were attacked and 12 self-propelled missiles were seized in Vladikavkaz station. Refugees simultaneously attacked an army camp and tried to take over a residential block that had been set aside for soldiers. O. Teziev, the Chair of the South Ossetian Council of Ministers was arrested, after several machine guns and weapons stolen from the stockpile were discovered in the boot of his car – though he was released later the same day, it is true. What happened on 10 June 1992 inflamed the situation in South Ossetia still further. North Ossetian volunteers under Bibo Dzutstsev openly fought in the war, and new units of armed volunteers formed that demanded weapons from the authorities. Tension mounted in North Ossetia by the day, and because it had an Ingush component, it threatened to mushroom into an Ossetian war on two fronts.

In mid-June, A. Galazov asked the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, personally to take a part in resolving the South Ossetian conflict. Yeltsin set up a meeting in Dagomys for 24 June, and the agreement signed by Yeltsin and Shevardnadze, and endorsed by Kulumbegov and Galazov is called the Dagomys agreement - but in fact it was signed in Sochi at President Yeltsin’s residence: Dagomys was shelved because of reports of a possible terrorist attack. The “Agreement of Principles for the Resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict” envisaged the creation of a Joint Supervisory Commission. The parties agreed to negotiate the economic reconstruction of districts in the conflict zone and create conditions for the return of refugees. On 14 May 1992, Peace-keeping forces moved in to South Ossetia.

A stop had been put to the bloodshed, and although the future was far from certain, it was already possible to live in South Ossetia and refugees gradually began returning. Migration Services, South and North, had to identify who would go back and who would stay - and to take into account the fact that for the foreseeable future refugees from Georgia would become citizens of North Ossetia. They summed up the impact of a war that had substantially altered the demographic picture of both South Ossetia and Georgia. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 164,000 Ossetians lived in Georgia – 65,200 in South Ossetia and the remaining 98,800 in the central Georgia. By 1993, the number of Ossetians left in central Georgia had nearly halved – to 45,700 people – and by 2002, 38,000 Ossetians were left in Georgia. In other words 65% of the Ossetian population had been expelled by Georgia itself. In time to come, very many of the Ossetians who remained would also be forced to flee across its borders.

The largest proportion of Ossetians lived in Tbilisi: 33,138 - a figure that by 1993 had dwindled to 16,000, i.e. 52% were expelled. In Gori there were 8,222, a population that by 1993 had dropped to 2,800, i.e. 66% were expelled.

In Kareli district the Ossetian population was 7,802 in 1989, of whom only 1,200 – or 18% - remained by 1993.

Unfortunately we do not have data on the number of Ossetians driven out of Gori district, which along with Kareli district came ‘tops’ for the scale and savagery of its Ossetian murder rate. When the conflict started, Ossetians lived in 97 villages in Gori district. It has not been possible to document the exact numbers expelled from each district, but sample data from a few villages gives a

clear indicative illustration. For convenience, we have grouped the villages by Village Soviet – the contemporary administrative unit:

1. Boshuri Village Soviet: from the villages of Ipnara, Tkhinala, Gagiuntubani – all 38 families (119 people) were expelled. 25 families (54 people) were expelled from Ormotsi and Gaichaantubani.
2. Sakavre Village Soviet: 166 families (526 people) were expelled from the villages of Sakavre, Tsiteltskaro, Pitsesi, Didtavi, Luli, Zemo Akhalsopeli, Nadarbazevi, Gulchandisi, and Peli. Entire villages were vacated.
3. Mghebriani Village Soviet: 63 families (194 people) were expelled from Mghebriani, Sakhortse, Tami, Okiani, Odi, Patara Chvarebi, Bortsvana, Pitnara, Chanchakha, and Didi Tsereti.
4. Kvakhvrelis Village Soviet: 38 families (140 people) were driven out of Avketi, Velebi and Urnuli villages.
5. Skra Village Soviet: 80 families (180 people) were forced out of Koshkebi
6. Ateni Village Soviet: 25 families (90 people) were expelled from Ghvedreti, Dre, Khandisi and Ikvnevi.
7. Zegduleti Village Soviet: 13 families (64 people) were expelled from Zegduleti.

In total, 1,248 people were forced out of the 33 villages cited. Below is a chart for Borjomi, Kareli and Tetrtskaro districts, which provides sub-totals of the numbers of families expelled. Gujareti Gorge, which was populated solely by Ossetians in nine large villages, was completely emptied.

District	Number of people expelled
All Borjomi district	564 families/2451 people
Borjomi city	41 families/203 people
Bakuriani settlement	205 families/992 people
Gujareti Gorge	225 families/820 people
Mitarbi village	102 families/460 people
All Kareli district & Kareli	1,977 families
Kareli town	200 families
Agara settlement	177 families
Tetrtskaro district	892 families

Whereas the Gujareti Gorge emptied in a day, the residents of Borjomi and Bakuriani left over time, depending on the level of harassment they experienced, or sometimes only after they had lost family members.

Keto Jigkaeva-Mamieva from Bakuriani lives in the Zavodskoy district of Vladikavkaz. She says: “I didn’t want to flee. My son and I lived very quietly, being no trouble to anyone, and I thought the vigilantes would forget all about us. One daughter was married to a Georgian in the west of Georgia, and the other was married to an Ossetian and lives in Akhaltsikhe. On 16 May 1991, my son and I went to visit my daughter in Akhaltsikhe and stayed for a month, because things seemed more peaceful there. Some Georgians came to the house and said: ‘Ossetians visit you to collect weapons and then go to Tskhinval!’ They thought that four Ossetians together were an anti-Georgian gathering. My daughter and son-in-law Anzor were not at home when they came. The Georgians beat us up, especially my boy, and confiscated all our valuables. They took my son away with them and went off to look for Anzor. Just then my grandsons came back from play school, and I had to stay behind with them until I could find a neighbour to look after them, then I ran after the departing car in my bare feet. They drove to the house of Anzora’s sister, dragged him out, then put both of them in the car – Anzor and my son David – and drove them off to the forest. I didn’t know what to

do, or where to go, and called the police. Who could I ask to help me? My children had vanished. They were shot dead. That night they threw my son's body into the river and hung up my son-in-law's body, dead. We found Anzor ourselves, and a Georgian fisherman found my son two weeks later. After the funerals my daughter and I left for North Ossetia and lived in the "Daryal" Hotel, and then a hostel, before finally receiving a small house in Zavodskoy district. Now I want to get my second daughter and her children and bring them here from western Georgia. Her husband died, and who will protect them if anything happens? Who knows what they are like, these Georgians?!"

Unfortunately the Migration Service of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania began grouping the refugees by to their Georgian districts of origin only in 1997, when the picture no longer reflected the original situation: many refugees had been able to find accommodation and acquire citizenship. Nevertheless, it is still possible to draw conclusions about which districts were most hostile to their Ossetians population at that time.

North Ossetian Migration Service data of 1 May 1997, on the number of refugees coming from central districts of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

No.	District and/or Population Centre	No. Individuals	No. Families
1	Tbilisi	7,291	2,545
2	Gori district, Gori city	5,830	1,734
3	Kareli district, Kareli town	4,515	1,407
4	Borjomi district, Borjomi town	1,582	522
5	Rustavi	1,579	477
6	Akhmeta district, Akhmeta town	1,458	428
7	Lagodekhi district, Lagodekhi town	1,136	372
8	Kaspi district, Kaspi town	1,053	332
9	Khashuri district, Khashuri town	1,025	308
10	Tetritskaro district	475	154
11	Mtskheta district, Mtskheta town	413	126
12	Dusheti district, Dusheti town	309	91
13	Gardabani district	282	84
14	Kvareli district, Kvareli town	271	80
15	Telavi district, Telavi town	219	68
16	Bolnisi district, Bolnisi town	211	64
17	Gurjaani district, Gurjaani town	188	64
18	Tsiteltskaro district	167	45
19	Kutaisi	94	34
20	Akhhaltsikhe district, Akhaltsikhe town	30	9
21	Marneuli district, Marneuli town	16	7
22	Kazbegi district	13	4
23	Poti	9	4
24	Batumi	5	3
25	Zugdidi district, Zugdidi town	2	1
	Total from central Georgia	28,176	9.032
	Abkhazia	236	93
	South Ossetia	914	335

The table shows that Tbilisi, the capital of 'democratic' Georgia, expelled most Ossetians, followed by the districts of Gori and Kareli.

A huge number of refugees re-settled on their own initiative among relatives in North and South Ossetia - which complicates the statistics.

In 1991-1992 South Ossetia registered that over 15,000 refugees and displaced persons had been forced to leave their homes as a result of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Of these, 10,148 were from parts of South Ossetia, and the rest were refugees from the Georgian interior. According to South Ossetian data, at least a further 35,000 villagers from South Ossetia left for Russia during the hostilities in North Ossetia-Alania. But this represents only a small proportion of the total: the governments of South Ossetia and North Ossetia even had a tacit understanding not to register refugees from South Ossetia. They were anxious in case the refugees dropped long-term roots in North Ossetia, and anyway hoped to re-build houses that had been destroyed, burned-out and abandoned by their owners, in a fairly short time, with federal help of course.

The demographic situation in South Ossetia was also changing. The flow of migration did not stop with the onset of peace - the people leaving the Republic just became migrants, not refugees. And naturally the refugees also tried to get fixed-up as best they could. Many of them managed to find accommodation in the city and hunted for work, trying their hand at trading goods, which became the most popular survival strategy in post-war conditions. South Ossetian villages with previously-mixed populations now became exclusively Georgian. It was they who now constituted the so-called 'enclave'.

Population figures in South Ossetia were never particularly favourable for long. Even before the war, the work force here used to seep away in search of a better life, but in those days patchwork migration did not bother anyone. As soon as notions like 'customs' and 'a border' came into play, the scale of the population transfers rose and became one-way. According to official data for the three years between 1990 and 1993, 5,349 people officially cancelled their registration in the republic and very many more left intending to find new lives elsewhere, without de-registering. By far the largest proportion of migrants went unrecorded, leaving during the chaos of war, then finding their feet later somewhere else.

"It seemed like treason to leave South Ossetia during the fighting. We thought the most important thing was to survive the war, then build somewhere to live over there and gradually return to a peaceful existence, perhaps even starting to make a go of things. But things turned out to be not so simple after the fighting stopped. We sat out a tense lull in the action then began asking ourselves: 'what next?' For the time being, life had lost its meaning. During the fighting it had been to defend our home and country - but now even hands that could shoot seemed redundant. The country was shattered and needed people to re-build it, people who were ready to work as selflessly as they had been to fight - because there was nothing to pay them with, except empty cartridge-cases and the stench of smoke and scorched earth.

R.A. a forced migrant who refused to ask for asylum, left for Russia with his family. He says: "We were really loath to leave. At first I thought that I would go, earn a bit of money then come back, but there was a war on and two of my kiddies had developed coughs from living in our cellar for a long time. Our money had long ago run out and we had no way of getting any more. The school where I used to work was now in the Georgian zone, and there was no other work for me in town. I had no weapons and even if I had, I was so short-sighted that I was useless for fighting. I moved to Russia, to the countryside and fixed myself up quite well - they had a shortage of teachers and promised me a flat. When will I go back home? Will I go back at all?"

The first year after the war was the most difficult and South Ossetia saw a steady brain-drain - of doctors, nurses, and various other professionals. The Social Welfare Committee of the South Ossetian Republic gives the following figures: In June 1993, one year after the end of hostilities, unemployment had reached 6,000 with a further 4,000 hidden unemployed, who still had contracts

but were on the books of enterprises that were at a standstill. A further 9,000 were completely dependent on social welfare, as refugees.¹¹

Unemployment and economic factors alone did not account for the rise in migration. The uncertainty of South Ossetia's political future, individual lack of prospects and especially a post-war crime wave, all forced people to leave. Businesses were not legally secure, because the laws were not enforced, and at a time of high unemployment and weak governance, the huge quantity of unregistered weapons still in the hands of yesterday's republican army inevitably led to armed 'score-settling'. Some youths and heads of households went away to North Ossetia and other parts of Russia for work. Very many families were temporarily short of a member or two.

In September 1993 a mass grave with the remains of 12 Ossetians was discovered near Eredvi village, and brought back terrible memories of the war. The Ossetians had been taken captive by Georgian paramilitaries in March 1991 and buried alive.

Story No 7: People who disappeared without trace

Zarina Viktorovna Tedeeva is the Chair of the Charitable Fund 'Remember', the Committee for Families of the Dead, Disappeared and Wounded. She tells how "Warrant Office Ushang Gigolaev, a sapper in Tskhinval hired a 'Ural' lorry from the army on 18 March 1991, with a view to visiting his parents in Chere (Kere – trans). He got together a group of passengers and they boarded the lorry. Gigolaev, two Russian servicemen and the driver were all armed. The van set off for Chere, past Eredvi, and via Ksuis. Some Georgians were picketing in Eredvi, but they did not stop the van. In Dmenis and Satikar some local residents got out of a car. The people who were planning to go back into town had to wait for the lorry on its way back from Chere. There was a large crowd in Dmenis, talking anxiously about what had had happened over the last two days. 'Surely you can't be driving through Eredvi now?' people were saying to the passengers. The night before, four Georgians driving a petrol tanker had been murdered and set on fire, among them a Merab Mindiashvili who went by the nickname of "Viro"¹² and was notorious for his cruelty and sadism. He was the man who had killed a teacher, Dmitry Kochiev, in the ambulance that was taking him from Kurta with the spinal fracture he had suffered in a previous beating. He shot Kochiev right there in the ambulance and made the 15 year-old-son accompanying him swallow some fragments of the shattered glass. Georgian paramilitaries were out to avenge Viro, and so it was dangerous to drive anywhere.

But the men did not want to look like cowards and went back to their lorry. There were 25 people inside. In Eredvi village a tractor was parked at the cross roads where one road leads over the bridge to Berula village. The lorry had no time to reverse before Georgian vigilantes leapt out, ripped off the tarpaulin and poured into the back of the lorry, belabouring everyone with metal piping and hurling them out onto the ground. When Ivan Doguzov shouted to the Russians to 'Shoot! Shoot!' they clubbed him and he died on the spot. Later they hurled women and children back onto the lorry and let it through, but carried on pulverising the men who were left behind.. The lorry made it to the Tourist Centre where Internal Troops of the federal Ministry of Internal Affairs were stationed. The women were in hysterics and demanded they go and help the men who had been taken captive, but the troops refused to do anything. Of the men, only the driver, two Russians and Gigolaev in the driver's cabin were saved. They did not even try to open fire and or try to save the captives. Only that night's edition of the "Vremya" news programme commented that 12 Ossetians had been stopped in Eredvi and taken away in an unknown direction. Reports of the incident emphasized that the passengers were seized on a regular bus

¹¹ Published in "Ard" No 3 June 1993

¹² Georgian for 'Mule' - author

route, to divert any dissatisfaction with the military who had done absolutely nothing to prevent this act of vengeance

The captives were paraded around Georgian villages while their captors shouted: "Hey! Anyone want a taste of Ossetian blood?" But the villagers shut their doors and windows. In Megvrekisi they were taken to the vigilantes' base then driven back to Viro's father, who traditionally had the first right to exact revenge – but he wanted nothing to do with it and said he didn't know who had murdered his son. Then the captives were taken back to Eredvi, thrown into a pit that was filled up with soil and tracted over. Givi and Tiaymuraz Gagiev were among the 12 seized by the Georgians and the next day, on 19 March 1991, their father Dmitry died of a heart attack. Relatives searched for the missing captives as best they could, and after a tip-off that some of the paramilitaries had criminal records, found ways of posting Wanted Notices throughout the Georgian prison system. The USSR Procuracy's criminal investigation unit also carried out searches. They found the grave on 26 September 1993, and on the first day uncovered the remains of five people. A Georgian resident of Eredvi who had witnessed everything from a distance gave them a tip-off about the site of another mass grave. When all the remains had been taken away, he quickly lowered himself into the pit unbeknown to anyone and marked the site with stones. The remains of a further 7 people were discovered there on 28 September. All the corpses had broken ribs and some had fractured spines. Their bodies were part-scorched and in the pit they found a melted petrol canister. The hands and feet of the murdered men had been bound with wire."

Here is a list of the men who died:

1.	Ibragim Abdulovich Dzhanayev	1965
2.	Omar Davidovich Gobozoyev	1958
3.	Makhar Melitonovich Tekhov	1965
4.	Chermen Kargoyevich Tekhov	1972
5.	Adam Vissarionovich Tekhov	1924
6.	Murat Zakharovich Gigolaev	1965
7.	Ibragim Kuzmich Gigolaev	1964
8.	Albert Sogratovich Gigolaev	1963
9.	Givi Dmitrievich Gagiev	1968
10.	Taymuraz Dmitrievich Gagiev	1957
11.	Vazha Georgievich Doguzov	1952
12.	Ivan Mikhailovich Doguzov	1958

No proof was ever found of Ossetian complicity with the group that decapitated Viro, but the Eredvi hostages were not the only people killed in revenge for his death. Apart from the murderous savagery described above, the Georgians also practised forms of ritual murder, atypical of Christian societies, and sacrificed Ossetians on the graves of murdered Georgians. One year after the death of Merab Mindiashvili – the famous 'Viro' - on 14 March 1992, Georgians took a villager from Khakhet in Dzau district captive, a Zurab Petrovich Bagaev who had been born in 1970. This village completely vanished under an avalanche in the earthquake of 29 April 1991. Zurab Bagaev had been in Tskhinval at the time and was one of two villagers saved. On 14 March he paid a visit to relatives who lived near the Red Church in Tskhinval, not far from the road in to Tamarasheni village, and in the dusk he was seized by a group of Georgians from Tamarasheni. There are reports that Zurab Bagaev was ritually murdered on Viro's grave.

Sarkis Chagaevich Margiev from Mejvriskhevi village was also ritually murdered in Bershueti cemetery on the graves of Georgians who had died in the attack on Tsinagar village.

Depending on how life worked out in South Ossetia, refugees whose homes were intact started gradually going back to them. After their frightful experiences, they had learned to survive in all conditions. At present the South Ossetian Republican Ministry for Special Affairs that deals with refugee issues, has 4,500 refugees and forcibly displaced persons on its books. There are 210 families – or 560 people – in six compact refugee centres in Tskhinval: the former rural polytechnic SPTU-131, the “Ossetia” tourist centre, and student hostels.

At present the North Ossetian Administration for Migration Affairs has 306 refugees from South Ossetia left on its books. The others have acquired citizenship and a passport, in accordance with RF refugee law, and so have been taken off the register and joined the category of Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDP). The remaining 306 belong to the category of people who are perhaps alone, weak, and unable to find a way out of their situation; people who cannot rely on their own wherewithal and continue waiting for help from the state. Maybe they had no homes to go back to, or maybe they had made up their minds where they would live in future.

For refugees from the Georgian interior, personal preference had no bearing on whether or not they could return home. A huge number of factors prevented them going back to their homes and country, the main one being that no one could guarantee them a warm reception - because it was not now-fellow-refugee Zviad Gamsakhurdia in person who had forced them out – but their Georgian neighbours. How could they live next door to each other now? Would the Georgian State protect them from fresh attacks and victimisation in future?

Secondly, they really had nowhere to go back to. Most of their flats and houses had now been occupied by Georgian families, who had been authorised to register the title deeds as their own. For many refugees, their homes had physically vanished – burned down or blown up, and dismembered brick by brick.

And thirdly, this was a different Georgia, not the old Soviet one where they had lived before. Poverty, unemployment, and a dearth of basic material conditions and social rights - this was their picture of the new Georgia, where it was senseless for refugees like them to return and start life over from scratch. However strong their emotional tug, they could not go back. We would ask: “Would you go back home if all the necessary conditions were guaranteed?” and everyone we asked would say: “That’s where our enemies live!”. There was no need for a specialist sociological survey: these people had lost the place they regarded as home.

Story No 8: The Road Home

Mirzabek Khubaev is 45 years old, comes from the Gujareti Gorge and now lives in Vladikavaz in North Ossetia. He emphasized that he is ‘not a refugee’. He said: “Sometimes I ask myself when I will stop going back there-? When do people stop visiting a cemetery? When they get used to their loss, and find new loved ones, or peace and happiness with people who are still alive. When will my own country mean nothing more to me than a cemetery for my long-gone ancestors? And when will the fading inscriptions on their untended gravestones stop hurting? When it is hard to remember who lies under the stone? Or when you remember them, but without a clutch at the heart?, Without tears pricking your eyes? When you can touch the warm stone with equanimity, the way you would lay flowers on the grave of an unknown soldier in a foreign country.

I lost the right visit my own country openly in April 1991. I used to live in Tsinubani village in the Gujareti Gorge in Borjomi district, and by then it had become absolutely clear that we had to leave. Georgians were coming up to the top of the Gorge more and more frequently – like landlords, for whom we had suddenly become a collective nobody, a foreign entity on their soil. As though they did not know why, or when our ancestors had come to settle and live on this land, raise cattle and pray on holy sites, of which there were quite a few here. What has become of our holy sites now? It was rare for anyone to pass them without a respectful bow and a tremulous prayer

That day in April 1991 an unusually large gang of ‘patriotic’ Georgians turned up. They rolled up in lorries and mini-buses, gave us an ultimatum – to clear off Georgian soil in three days – then waited for the deadline to expire. They had fun, did a little firing with their automatic weapons and laughed as our cattle ran away in terror. They cleared out everything they took a fancy to and loaded it onto their vehicles: pure woollen blankets; cheese; warmed butter by the vat-load, cattle and other small livestock. Our “landlords” got bolder and felt drunk with impunity.

The first families to go just rose from the spot with not a moment’s thought, and without anything except the clothes they stood in, and went on foot to the Armenian border in the south. They had young children, and teenage daughters whom they dressed up in men’s clothing and concealed as best they could. Others of us did the rounds of the villages, feverishly trying to lay hands on a car so we could save at least something and not embark completely empty-handed on an uncertain future where no one was waiting for us.

My youngest sister had been living in North Ossetia for a year, planning to enter the technical institute there and my middle sister lived with her family in Tskhinval where there was a war on. We had no idea what had happened to her. But my brother had been an invalid from childhood and needed crutches to walk: there was no question of my family leaving on foot. My father and I made it to Tzagveri where we had Georgian relatives-of-relatives, and tried to negotiate transport for a reasonable price, and leave some of our domestic paraphernalia. We were perhaps the largest cattle-owners in the village and so tried to park some of our herd with other people for the time being.

Meanwhile, my mother was terrified of an attack back at home, bundled some money in a cloth and ran out through the back yard towards the forest. There was dirty, slushy snow on the ground, and some nettles, already curling over bare winter earth in a small gully. My mother fell into the gully, and into the nettles, and lay there neither dead nor alive, freezing at the sound of every round of automatic fire shot at the forest. The Georgians had noticed a woman running away but did not follow her. Only with their laughter. My brother was at home alone, helpless but resigned – and ready for any outcome.

“On your feet!” one of the ‘landlords’ yelled at him, then stopped short when he saw the crutches, turned on his heel and emptied what sounded like a whole magazine into a large calendar on the wall, with a picture of St George by Kosta Khetagurov on it. My mother had been lying in the nettles for a little while, but when she heard the shots, flung down her bundle and ran, stumbling, towards her son – deaf to a neighbour who shouted that the Georgians had left. Next day not one villager was left in the Gujareti Gorge.

I went back the first time, that year, when the war was still going on in South Ossetia. I drove half way then finished the journey on foot. I had a woollen blanket with me, bread and tins of food. I had no plan in mind, I just wanted to go home. As I got off the bus, I crossed the Armenian border then hitch-hiked my way to the Tabatskura lake and walked from there Gujareti-wards. It was a very long walk, and the closer I got to Gujareti, the further I moved from the road, climbing higher and higher into the forest. I had no weapon with me, except a small

hunting knife, that would hardly be a help for self-defence but could be handy in the forest. By evening I could already see my own home, from above in the forest. In the dusk its roof still seemed intact and I began to hope that the double-barrelled rifle I had hidden in the attic was still in one piece. Somewhere in the distance I could hear dogs barking, sheep bleat, the lowing of cows and the occasional shout of a shepherd. Soon a pitch-black Gujarati night fell and every sound fell silent. I edged down the familiar path cautiously, descended below the tree-line and stepped over our gate that had been yanked off its hinges and lay on the ground. A large shadow came lolloping towards me with long bounds. I gripped my knife, but next moment recognised my dog. Old Tseba was alive and had been living in the house all that time. He yelped and bounced around me, tugging all my clothes in his delight. I gave him my bread and went to look round the house.

The double-barrelled rifle was not in the attic, and in fact there was no attic to speak of. The roof had been almost completely dismantled and was propped by some miracle on a few beams. Every window pane had been removed from the house, and upstairs even the frames that I had planned and fitted with my own hands had been levered out. The furniture had disappeared and the small chandelier had been torn out of the ceiling.

I remembered I was starving and went downstairs to the cellar. Here all the shelves had been removed and basically everything wooden had gone. I gathered up a few unbroken jars of jam from the floor and went upstairs into the house to sleep. All this time I didn't allow myself to think that I was behaving strangely. I convinced myself that I was home and that these were the walls where I had grown up and lived in warmth and comfort. And that everything that happened here was in some different life that had nothing to do with me. I sipped some water from the tap whose valve had been ripped out. Water had flooded the yard and made a little lake. I couldn't find any bedding and so I made up a bed from my own clothing as best I could, and lay down on the floor. The dog lay next to me with its chin on my knee. I woke to the sound of a cattle herd being driven up the track by two men, apparently father and son. I waited for Tseba to run after the herd, so that I could identify our own cow, then went out the back yard and up into the forest. I hid among dense trees in the direction of Kerdzen, that were impenetrable for cattle, where people would go to hunt bears. Here I dug a pit and hid my jars of jam, still scarcely aware of what I was doing, then went off to the little stream tumbling nearby, to catch some fish. It was so full of trout that I was just catching them by hand the way we did when we were boys. Then I set and lit a bonfire in the dense forest and ate breakfast, like a regular Gujarati huntsman – and remembered how I had dreamed of having a breakfast like this when I was back in Vladikavkaz.

And that was how I spent about ten days. I would sleep during the day, or wander through the forest picking berries and wild pears, staying clear of bears and catching fish, then at night go back down to the village about five miles away and wander through the yards with my dog. One morning I moved up to my little refuge in the forest side by side with some sheep that were being herded up to high pasture. The shepherd was a small boy with a dog and the flock was so big it got out of control and scattered all over the hillside. I could not resist the temptation, jumped up and grabbed one young sheep that had become separated from the flock by its hind legs, broke its neck, and dragged it into the bushes. While I was skinning and slicing it, the shepherd and his flock had moved quite far off. I rinsed the meat in the stream, whittled down a branch, and cooked kebabs.

I felt I could have lived there a few more years more, if it had been continual summer and I had had no need to hide.. But when I left Vladikavkaz I had told nobody except my little sister. It was then I realised I would come back again. And so I went back down to the house, put out some meat and dry biscuits for the dog, bowed to the holy shrine – which is the protector of men – and went on foot to Tabatskuri and from there to the Armenian border, now walking on the open road.

When I got to the “Redant” holiday home where my parents and brother now lived, I put a plastic bag of trout on the table. My mother said nothing but looked at my feet and, her eyes welled up with tears. She realised from the colour of the mud drying on my boots that I had been home. “Did you not bring any soil with you?” she asked. “No” I said. “There was no point in bringing a handful and I could not dig up the whole of the Gujareti Gorge”.

Since then I have been going back every year. My dog no longer comes to greet me but a few new long-term residents have appeared in the Gorge, living in the remaining houses. Sometimes I have taken one of my friends or cousins with me, and I no longer go alone. One time I even went by road from Tbilisi to Borjomi, then caught a suburban train to Bakuriani. I kept my distance from people and made out that I was deaf and dumb. I did not know a word of Georgian, literally not one word.

My former neighbour was a refugee: Khazbi Dzhigkaev. He decided to take a leaf out of my book and visit his old house in Tsinubani. He used the same route over the Armenian border and made it to his village. Then when he saw his house totally scavenged and lying in ruins, he turned on his heel and went back to Vladikavkaz. He had just enough strength to get back to the “Redant” sanatorium, but died climbing the stairs.

This year I took my little sister Ulyana, and her husband and child with me. This time we drove over on the open road in a car with Georgian number plates. The front door of the house was half -rotten and tied on with rope. I didn’t have a knife with me, so burned through the rope with my cigarette lighter and pushed open the door. The lighter fell into cow dung. Only the first floor of our house was left and it had been turned into a cattle shed, its walls still papered with the family’s wall paper. The rusty tap in the yard had run dry. There in the midst of the amazing dirt and dung was our hammock, tied to two old plum trees. A bonfire was smoking somewhere. People now occupied the village, the old village school and the shops, which were now better-kept. We climbed up the cemetery, and tidied up the abandoned graves as best we could. One grave stone had gone. A few villagers followed on our heels, and kept us constant company, forever exchanging greetings and badgering us with questions. We did not answer. Finally we walked up along the track to the holy shrine of Lægty Dzuar. The track had been washed away and petered out. We got to the Lægty Dzuar, cleared it up and got out candles. I started looking for my lighter then remembered I had dropped it. The Georgians standing nearby immediately started going through their pockets then two of them silently sprinted down to the village and came back a few minutes later out of breath, and with matches. I lit the candles. “Oh, Holy Lægty Dzuar!” May the people who destroyed our lives fall into your hands! And may your will be done!”

- *“Mirzabek, you shouldn’t curse here” my brother-in-law Tolik said quietly.*
- *“It is a prayer!” I said.*

We had to leave. As we drove out of the village, we stopped at the spring where Georgians had been sitting on the rocks for whole millennia. My sister went to draw some water. One of the shepherds pointed over to the water source up in the distance where the water was dirty, and told her in broken Russian that that water was not suitable for drinking. He was telling us! But we said nothing, just collected some water, washed, and listened to their conversation.

- *“Have they come back, what do you think?”*
- *“Must be. Shevardnadze has allowed them to come back now.”*
- *“But where are they going to live? He’s not intending to build them new houses is he?”*
- *“Well they’ve nowhere to stay in North Ossetia. The North doesn’t want to feed them anymore.”*

My sister translated what the shepherds had said as our car was already heading down the potholed road, lined with its sparse reminders of a fir plantation, now almost completely felled.

I looked back at the village, at my former life. Shadows would soon lengthen over it. Cattle would wend down from the high pasture. Metal milk churns would chink and clang to the sudden barking of dogs, and the splashing of milk. The mowers would gather at the spring and rinse sweat and grass from their faces. Young girls would come for water, laughing. Life seemed to have fled from the place when we did. I looked back – and my country was like a child that had wiped tears over its dirty face and now has no more tears to cry. “Lord”, I thought, “When will I stop coming here?”¹³

People who had lost their home and country suffered such a blow, that ‘stress’ is too genteel a word to describe it. The experience of being ejected from their land cost many of them their lives. People who had been through it often manifested numerous illnesses, mainly cardio-vascular disease, cancer, hypertonia and tuberculosis, as a result of which a large number of refugees died within five years of being uprooted. No statistics have been kept, although it has been possible to put together data for individual districts, like for example the Gujareti Gorge. Although our statistics were taken from a compact refugee settlement in Zavodskoy district of Vladikavkaz, for refugees from Borjomi – they may still be incomplete, since some refugees managed to build themselves new homes elsewhere before they received the government’s new wooden prefabs. It should be said that these were the minority.

So, according to our partial data, around 1,280 people from 327 families were expelled from the Gujareti Gorge and Mitarbi village in Borjomi district. Of these, 211 – or 17% - died of various diseases within the first years of their deportation.

Data on Mortality among refugees from the Gujareti Gorge in Borjomi district, during the first five years of their expulsion

Populated settlement	No. families expelled	No. individual deaths
Tsinubani village	21	17
Tsitlesopeli village	37	19
Gujareti village	48	35
Odeti village	20	12
Ghinturi village	20	16
Aidarov village	11	12
Gverdisubani village	38	22
Vardevani village	13	8
Machartskali village	12	5
Mitarbi village	102	65
TOTAL	327	211

Note: 4 people on this list died in the terrorist attack on the Central Market in Vladikavkaz in 1999. Two on the list committed suicide.

Of 17 refugees from Tsolda village in Leningor district, 12 died of a variety of diseases shortly after they were expelled – all of them Margiev men.

¹³ Printed in “Aydaen – Mirror” No 4-5, October 1997

Fedor and Natela Tadtaev from Kintsisi village, Kareli district had a large family of six sons and three daughters. Their eldest son Vasya came up from Gagra as soon as he heard that trouble had broken out. He was taken captive at the house just one hour later and driven to the paramilitary base in Kareli. Another son, Yura, took his younger brothers and sisters with him and fled to the forest. When the Georgians broke into the house they murdered the father, Fedor Tadtaev. Vasya was shot in the forest in Gori district. Nateli and the children hid in the woods for two weeks, out in the snow with no food or water. The children were frozen stiff, emaciated, and ill. One of them, Besik, never recovered and died two years later.

Margo Maximovna Bolataeva from Tsitsagiantkari village in Gori district, now lives in the Zavodskoy district of Vladikavkaz. She describes us how her relatives - Zarbet and his wife, Lyuba Bolataev - were killed in Tsitsagiantkari: both shot dead in their home. From day one their sons had been forced to take cover in the forest and by the time their parents were attacked, they had already fled for Russia. One of them returned to give his parents a burial, then went away again. The other son died of tuberculosis some time later in Vladikavkaz, never having regained full health after the trauma he had experienced and his freezing spell in the forest.

Is there a way of compensating losses like these? We do not know if the Georgian Government's draft Restitution law includes recompense for this kind of loss? And what restitution could there be for losses like this?

Fears that relations between Ingush and North Ossetians were deteriorating proved justified. A fleeting war over the Prigorodny district in October-November of 1992 produced new refugees – both Ingush and Ossetians. After it was over, Ingush refugees began returning, under a new Federal Programme that guaranteed their security and financial restitution for homes and property they had lost. The process was protracted. Some Ingush homes were occupied by Ossetian refugees from the Georgian interior, by the time the programme started. By their own admission, the refugees felt awkward about this, realising that sooner or later their rightful owners would come back. They didn't even attempt any repairs, except when they knew the owners definitely had somewhere else to live in Ingushetia.

Tsiuri Tuieva from Koreti village, Akhmeta district in Kakheti said that: "When war broke out in Tskhinval I worked in the club and my husband, in the state farm. We got on very well with the Georgians. No one had laid a finger on us at that point, but I never recovered from my terror when Kosta Tedeta, the son of close relatives, was murdered in 1991. That was the year the Kokoyevs' son was murdered in Koreti – I can't remember what they called him. How could we stay? We abandoned our large two-storey house, grabbed a few belongings and came here. They say pure mayhem broke out after we left. Our money soon ran out and there was no work to be had. At first we lived in a hostel, then found ourselves an empty house where an Ingush had lived. I was stronger than my husband – women can generally cope better than men. My husband fell into a depression, developed pains in his heart and died five years ago. I picked and sold chives, and never turned down any offer of work. The children grew up and now my oldest son is a teacher. My younger one is in the army and my daughter is an artist. Our house is 'non-forfeit', meaning that sooner or later its real owner will come back, because he has not forfeited it. Otherwise we would have at least done some repairs, because the roof leaks. Every day we hear official spin, promising us subsidies, and we believe it because we don't want to live in a house that belongs to someone else. Even if we have to live out on the street, we will not go back to Georgia. A month ago I went back to Koreti and heard that the Georgian government is buying houses in Kakheti for Adjarians who were victims of flooding. They were buying them two-storey houses for \$4,000, but not ours, because relatives were looking after it. But it was difficult to get there and I speak bad Georgian in any case. In Koreti everyone speaks Georgian well, but I went to an Ossetic-language school in Lagodekhi. I didn't

apply for Georgian papers – I just got a temporary insert in my passport and somehow managed to find my way along the Zar Road to a Georgian checkpoint near Tskhinval, but the Georgians wouldn't let me through. Then via Auneu and Ruisi, we somehow got through into Georgia. I let Adjarians live in our house. They had no money but I thought they seemed like decent people. Let someone take care of the house. Perhaps they'll buy it.”

A number of the refugees in North Ossetia mentioned subsidies from the government that this refugee woman referred to, but cited different figures – ranging from 15 to 400 thousand roubles. Some of them were given a real house, and some just got a plot of land with a disused train carriage in an empty field. Clearly the refugees in North Ossetia were divided into categories, depending on who was responsible for providing the material assistance for their re-settlement and adaptation. The Deputy Head of the Migration Board of the North Ossetian Ministry of Internal Affairs, D Kulumbegov, explains. “In the early stages and up to 2000, the principal type of assistance was in the form of interest-free loans. In 1993 these were worth 300,000 roubles, in non-denominated currency. Then at different stages they were worth 3,4,5 or 6 million roubles i.e. in ‘old’ money. In 1998, the sum was worth 14,500 roubles in ‘new’ money, and by 2000, a grant of 9,000 roubles was allocated per family member. Before 2000, around 2,000 families had availed themselves of this form of assistance while it was on offer, but not all of them were able to re-settle on it because the price of housing was too high and they found themselves in an excruciating situation: the law then in force did not countenance a second subsidy from the state. The payments were useful for people who were in a position to top them up with their own money.

The difference in the scale of loans and subsidies arose because legislation changed over time, the political situation improved, the authorities had more scope available to them and assistance to forcibly displaced people became more practical and effective. At present, Russian legislation allows two forms of state contribution from the federal budget for re-settlement and adaptation. These are: payment of non-returnable subsidies to the forcibly displaced for building or acquiring accommodation, and the second is – provision of a flat from the re-sale housing market. The forcibly displaced are additionally entitled to receive assistance from Subjects of the Russian Federation, international humanitarian agencies etc.

When forcibly displaced persons spoke about grants of 15,000 or 110,000, this was assistance provided by the Government of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania from the sums available to it at that time. The beneficiaries of 15,000-rouble grants in 1991-2000 were refugees and forcibly displaced people who had lived for protracted periods in the “Ossetia” and “Redant” sanatoria. When a decision was taken to move them out, they were given one-off plots of land they had chosen for themselves, in Ir village on the territory of Prigorodny district. In line with a general plan to develop the settlement, gas pipelines were laid, water was provided and major thoroughfares were asphalted. Fifteen thousand roubles was of course a symbolic sum, but in view of the capital infrastructure that was being laid in at the government's cost, many people began to settle here. Forty four of the neediest families, displaced from the “Ossetia” and “Redant” sanatoria received detached houses here, and 10 families were provided with building materials.

In 2002 and 2003, forcibly displaced families who lived in condemned or adapted housing that was unsuitable for further use, received payments of 110,000 roubles each. Assistance ranged from grants of 61,000 to 110,000 roubles, depending on the size of the family, and 758 families availed themselves of it. So in this way, the scale of material assistance fluctuated in accordance with the normative legal base on the re-settlement of forcibly displaced people, and in accordance with what was financially possible. In time to come, the scale of assistance might rise and people who had received help today might once again find themselves at a disadvantage. Although the price of housing must be factored in, because it rose significantly during these years.

It would be simpler to say that to date around 4,200 families were on local authority lists for improved housing and a further 3,000, to date, were waiting for a variety of reasons to be put on the register: altogether, over 21,000 people. But with current levels of financing, we are able to tackle an average of no more than 100 families per year. That is to say it will take more than 40 years to settle those currently in need. This will not do. A whole generation is growing up in atrocious conditions with no roof over their head.

International relief programmes for the forcibly displaced in North Ossetia also deserve a mention. The representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in the North Caucasus mainly coordinated the relief effort, although offices of the Danish Refugee Council and the Swiss Development Agency in Russia were also active. In the early 1990s their humanitarian activity was mostly confined to provision of food, medicines and domestic necessities, etc. Over the past four years a house-building programme for the neediest refugees and people displaced from Georgia has been underway, under a tripartite agreement between the Government of North-Ossetia-Alania, the UNHCR and the Administration of Migration Affairs. 240 homes have been built during this period for their compact re-settlement in the Prigorodny, Kirovsky and Pravoberezhny districts of the Republic. The settlements are equipped with gas, water, electricity and roads, since the house and their infrastructure were constructed simultaneously.”

These people are lucky, because they not only have a roof over their heads, but they have their own houses and a postal address in a country that has given them citizenship. Bit by bit, they are rebuilding their lives and trying to return to the sort of life that their ancestors led for centuries in Georgia i.e. rearing cattle and worshipping God. The only grit in the mix is their sense of years wasted living in sanatoria and hostels. Those ten years as ‘refugees’ they remember as the most painful and futile of their lives. They doggedly plant walnut and pine trees, so that new life burgeons around them, as they start theirs. For some reason the trees refuse to grow: it’s a different climate that doesn’t suit all plants. Over these years, many of the former refugees have started developing arthritis and other diseases of the spine and joints.

“Yes, it is a problem” – D. Kulumbegov admits. “Many of them do indeed find the North Ossetian climate difficult, but what can you do? The ideal solution would be to re-settle them in the Republic of South Ossetia, if liveable conditions could be arranged for them there – but without a solution to the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and the prospect of stability, you won’t find many people prepared to settle in South Ossetia. Incidentally, this offer was made to refugees who were being re-settled from the “Ossetia” and “Redant” sanatoria, and 36 families expressed a willingness to go back. They each received 50,000 roubles’ assistance per family, but not all of them managed to make a go of it. In my view, that is the approach we should be taking and every family that wants to return to South Ossetia should be given the support to do so.

And similarly we should not forget about the Ossetians in Lagodekhi and Akhmeta districts who would like to move to South Ossetia where they have their roots. Their ancestors settled Kakheti not that long ago. The Georgians of course are not happy to think of them that way, because it means proportionally more Ossetians in South Ossetia -- but to be honest we are not happy to have compatriots there who are under pressure and living in constant fear, while the Georgian authorities cannot guarantee their security or normal living conditions. This problem should be raised during negotiations of the Joint Supervisory Commission and drawn to the attention of international parties, so that the organised transfer of refugees wanting to return to South Ossetia can take place - before they share the fate of the tens of thousands of refugees who fled the Georgian interior 15 years ago. Principles of human rights and individual security should outweigh narrow national interests.”

Today Ossetians are concentrated in two large districts of Kakheti – Akhmeta and Lagodekhi – with a few in Telavi. Kakheti is a land of orchards and viniculture, and a wonderful way of life that is quite distinct from other parts of Georgia. This is one reason why people were extremely loath to leave it

and some hung on many years after the war in South Ossetia had finished. Those who managed to sell their houses and get out in time, are now thriving and doing better than many other refugees from Georgia. Ossetians from Kakheti have stronger family ties with South Ossetia than with the North. But it is becoming harder all the time to leave, without fear of ruin. There are many properties in Kakheti that are not selling, and buyers have yet to hand over money for houses that unofficially became 'theirs' 2-3 years ago. Nor are they likely to, because pursuing debtors through the local courts is useless. Ossetians in Kakheti are in a no-win situation. Their district schools in Akhmeta and Lagodekhi have closed down, and the one school left in Pona village, in Lagodekhi district, has a Georgian head master. There are very few children, because the population in Pona and surrounds is visibly shrinking. The children's school books that were brought in from the South-Ossetian Autonomous Region in Soviet days are now so dog-eared that one teacher confessed she has to stitch back the pages every year, and iron them.

Ossetian plots are several times smaller than the holdings of the Georgian farmers, because the local authorities re-sold 600 hectares of common land that had previously belonged to the Ossetian population, to Azeris. It costs an awful lot of money to work small plots of land independently, because the farmers need to hire a tractor, buy petrol etc.

It is mostly elderly people who still live in the villages. They are waiting for their houses to sell and their adult children to come back for them from North Ossetia. With no way of receiving material support from their children, these old people live very impoverished lives. Often they don't want to admit how things have changed and use their last coins to travel north to their children – only to fall victim to the new visa regime, which is beyond the mental reach of citizens of the old USSR. Close relatives come and collect many of them, without waiting for their houses to sell. A vast amount of empty property stands in the villages that Georgian families will soon occupy (they think, why pay good money for it?) The fact that many villages in Akhmeta district occupy the Pankisi Gorge complicates things further, because their Ossetian inhabitants feel the heat from Chechens and Kists too – not just the Georgians.

Zinaida Razhdenovna Nartikoyeva comes from Kvemo-Khalatsani village in Akhmeta district and but now lives in the Tarski settlement of Prigorodny district, North Ossetia. She relates how: "Kists lived on the other side of the Alazani River, in Shua-Khalatsani village. They kept themselves to themselves and did not have much to do with other people. We had separate pastures, and did not get in each other's way. The village primary school was Georgian, although Kvemo-Khalatsani was exclusively Ossetian. It used to be home to more than 100 households, but now only 4-5 are left. Then all the troubles started, but my husband and I couldn't get away. My husband was ill, then became paralysed, so where could we go? Our children were studying in Russia and we decided to stick it out, keep our heads down, and try to sell the house. It seemed we had missed the worst of it, because what would anyone want with a paralysed man? Well – they kept on stealing our cattle one by one, then either the Georgians or the Kists would have shoot-outs in the village. They were really rude to us and wouldn't let us onto the bus. And that was that. Other people had it a lot worse. But my husband needed really serious hospital treatment so my son came - for his father first, while I stayed on in the house alone. Then I also fled. I didn't think I could leave the place, and I don't like it here. My family all lived together with relatives in Tarski, then after the war with the Ingush, the house next door came free, and they moved into it. I came and joined them in 1996. The Ingush owner renounced his title to the house and built himself a new one somewhere in Pervomaisky district, but we still could not register the property in our name. My husband died here. I try not to think about our house in Kvemo-Khalatsani. After I left, it just stood empty, before it was taken over by Chechens – 15 of them. They say they are also refugees.

Since the end of the 1990s, Kakhetin-Ossetians have been trying to move over to South Ossetia. Convinced they will never be able to sell their houses - "The Georgians say they'll become theirs anyway " - they have been trying to negotiate some kind of accommodation in South Ossetia where

they could move in with a bare minimum of things. They are hardworking people and know how to run a business, if they get a helping hand to start with.

The drive to go to South Ossetia, not North, has become a trend now among Kakhetin-Ossetians. Delegations from the Lagodekhi and Akhmeta districts of Georgia would come over to South Ossetia with a few representatives from each village, bringing signed petitions to the President, first Chibirov, then President Kokoity. They wanted their problem solved at governmental level. In the last few years, Georgian authorities had been housing Adjari flood victims in the Pankisi Gorge, thereby solving at one stroke the financial problem of their re-settlement – because Ossetian houses were ten a penny - and the future demography of the Pankisi Gorge in favour of ethnic Georgians, as Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Co. had so doggedly insisted.

Actually Kakhetin-Ossetians began moving in September 2004 right after the fighting had ended - and one family moved out of Tbilisi even with the fighting at its height. The State found the money to move them to South Ossetia, where small homes were rigged up for them. About 40 households moved over during this period and the grown-up sons of some of them are now serving in the army in South Ossetia. Kakhetin-Ossetians have mostly been dispersed through Tskhinval district, in the villages of Tsunar, Zar, Rustavi and in Dzau settlement. Of those who moved, only a handful were able to sell their houses and none for more than 500 dollars.

According to the 2002 All-Georgian census, 6,109 Ossetians were living in Kakheti.

There are famous instances the world over, in which refugees who were an economic burden and a source of potential tension in one country, transformed into an economic power-house in their new one. That is what happened with the tide of immigrants that washed over Germany at the end of the post-war period, and it is a continuous process in the USA, which tends to regard immigrants as a positive force for creativity. With the shrinking of its population during the war years, South Ossetia has demographic problems. For it, the influx of kinsmen with industrious habits and a desire to work the land, is a positive development and key to its economic growth.

PART II: THE RETURN

A few years after the fighting in South Ossetia was over, the start of a Georgian-Ossetian negotiation process made it possible to talk about the intentions and capacity of both sides to resolve the problem of refugees and forcibly displaced peoples. Until then, almost the whole burden had fallen on North Ossetia.

The first thing up for discussion, was the possibility of organising their return to the homes where they previously lived. In February 1997, the Joint Supervisory Commission on regulating the Georgian-Ossetian conflict agreed a “Procedure for the Voluntary Return of People Forcibly Displaced or Given Asylum as a Consequence of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict, to their Previous Places of Permanent Residence.” In September 1997, a Special Ad Hoc Committee was set up within the Joint Supervisory Commission to facilitate the process. The Committee coordinated the activity of all the agencies involved.

In November 1997, Presidents Chibirov of South Ossetia and Shevardnadze of Georgia met in Dzau settlement in South Ossetia. The concluding document of the Dzau meeting notes that “The priorities for normalising Georgian-Ossetian relations remain a lasting political settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and the voluntary and secure return of refugees and forcibly displaced peoples.” On the crest of these good intentions the Presidents announced that 1998 would be the “Year the Refugees Return” – perhaps to nudge themselves to take more decisive action, or just to underline the positive tenor of their meeting. The only clear thing was that this announcement only scratched the surface of the problems that needed to be solved before refugees went back. In any case, the

work would never be done in one year, even if the Georgians facilitated the return of Ossetian families with the best will in the world.

Realistically speaking, the return of refugees to the Georgian interior was highly unlikely either then or at any time in the near future. Most refugees preferred to make North Ossetia their permanent home, where they could acquire landholdings to build on, and were already regarded as potential citizens. Over the years they had lived on North Ossetian territory, many had successfully integrated in its economic and political life: most had found work; many were involved in cross-border trading; OAPs were receiving Russian pensions; their children were studying at schools and colleges, etc. Very few of them would contemplate starting life over where they used to live, even if many still lacked basic housing.

The least-settled people gave the most heart-rending reasons for not wanting to go back to Georgia. Perhaps there too, in prosperous Soviet Georgia, they had lived in the margins for one reason or another, and did not feel happy there, in their own country.

Story No 9: Home is where....



Natela Kisieva comes from Tbilisi and lives in Tarski village, in the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia. She relates: "I was born in Lamiskana village in Kaspi district, and was brought up in an orphanage because I had no parents. I grew up and moved to Tbilisi where I got married. My husband was an orphan too. We both had no roots and started out from scratch. We both worked in the Knitwear Factory and lived in one room of a hostel, where there were 18 families on one corridor. We worked there for 35 years and all that time we were on a housing list. We were overtaken by everyone, even people who came to work in the factory after we did. It was our turn in 1991, but just then I was sacked. They called it 'natural wastage' but for some reason the 'natural wastage' only affected Ossetians. There were also countless demonstrations and speeches against Ossetians and we were forced to stay and listen to them. Or sometimes they would round up all the Ossetians and bus them to Tskhinval for demonstrations, although we always hid when that happened. It became very difficult to live. We were constantly abused and called ragged asses. They wasted no opportunity to show they despised us. Life got so complicated that we didn't care about waiting for a flat. My husband and I were basically used to making do in any old corner, but my son was 16 years old then, studying at college and I dearly wanted at least him to get away from the poverty line. And then again, it was simply getting dangerous to stay. We were afraid for our son. I thought that I belonged, wherever my home happened to be. But probably there is no home for people like us on this earth. Your country is still your country, even if it is cursed. I wouldn't go back there for mountains of gold. I can't remember hearing a warm word from anyone, especially not in the last two years I was there.

We left Tbilisi for Vladikavkaz and went to the refugee centre, which quartered us in this school. We were given one room. My husband died soon afterwards. My son worked on a building site at one time, but now he is always ill – with heart trouble. He is not working, he has nowhere to live, and no chance of getting married. We live on my pension of 1,000 roubles per month. When he was feeling a bit better, for a few years I tried to persuade him to marry. I would go and spend the night in the boiler room. It just needed the rubbish clearing out of it. Otherwise the roof didn't leak and it was fine. But by then he was past caring."

The 'room' she refers to is actually a space behind a screen in one of the former school halls. There are a few partitions like this here, screening off people's fractured lives, and total despair of ever getting the money promised them by their host government. People whose turn in the queue for help never comes.

A significant number of the forcibly displaced, who live in conditions very like these, are unable to clamber their way up unaided. They still expect help from the government and do not pin much hope on their own efforts.

Lali Elbakieva from Gori lives in the hostel of the "Conquer" factory. She recalls: "I used to work in a shop, I spoke perfect Georgian, got on very well with them, had many Georgian friends, and I thought I might be safe, so I just kept my head down. But in Gori people had a real 'down' on all Ossetians, no matter how they behaved. The driving force behind it was Shmagi – I don't know if that was his real name, or a pseudonym. He went round every firm in person and insisted that the directors fire the Ossetian staff. Our director told me to go before something bad happened. My husband, children and I had to leave for North Ossetia, where we were put up in a hostel. My children were adult and went their own ways. My husband died 10 years later. I moved in with my parents in the hostel where my father was given a room by the factory where he worked. I am ill and find it hard to live on my own. I had an operation that got infected and led to peritonitis. They did a second operation and took out just about everything they could. I was left an invalid. The second operation made me miss the deadline for registering, so I was one month too late. Because of that they took me off the local authority list and I lost the right to a grant or housing. I tried to sue, but the court found in favour of the local authority. It wasn't my fault I missed the deadline!"

Among the forced migrants from South Ossetia and the Georgian interior, there are a fair number like her who are not in a position to look for work. Between January and October 2000, the North Ossetian-Alania Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare categorised 127 families – or 371 people – as 'socially vulnerable'. They each received a one-off social welfare grant of 3,000 roubles, which was worth about 107 US dollars at the going rates. Another one fifth of the new arrivals, approximately, were beyond active working age. This category were definitely in no position to start planning their return to their former homes, although even now they could settle more easily if the Law on Restitution were to compensate them for the property they had lost and moral damages they had suffered.

Only one thing drove some of the refugees to go back to their old homes despite the conditions prevailing at the time in Georgia: a desire to be fully autonomous members of society again with their own roof over their head, – however shaky it might be.

Their decision was often fuelled by resentment, built up over many years' living on the margins. They resented their new country which, though sympathetic and the home of kinsmen, would not allow them to blend in or over-step a clearly defined line, once it had given them asylum and relief. Many researchers have called this aspect of the relationship between refugees and the local population - "cultural distance". The things that refugees and displaced people shared with their host society – even ethnicity - were still nurtured somewhere else, and came out in a different mentality and view of the world. What increased the distance was that forced migrants, who included refugees from rural areas, tried to settle in as fast as possible, using relief money they had to hand. As a result, rural incomers settled into hostels and sanatoria right on the perimeter of Vladikavkaz, which exacerbated the tension between town and country. The Migration Service is not to blame for this of course, when you take into account the difficulty of housing a wave of refugees, with no clear picture of how long they will be in North Ossetia. With the benefit of hindsight of course, it would have made more sense to re-settle mountain peoples of South Ossetia in the mountainous regions of North Ossetia. This would have eased the burden on Vladikavkaz and reduced social tension. It is not too late for this

now. It would at the same time help re-populate mountainous districts that are currently losing people.

Another way of lessening tension would be to create compact settlements for refugees, where they could go through the process of adapting to their new lives more easily, and in the company of others who were going through the same thing. There are a few compact settlements of this sort in North Ossetia. UNHCR and the North Ossetian Migration Service, for example, have jointly built 86 homes for more than 400 refugees in the Komsomolskoye settlement alone.

Pathologically sensitive to the slightest rebuff, some refugees try to blend into the background any way they can, and others fall into depression. Many refugees admit that they do everything they can to conceal their status and the address where they currently live. This is particularly true of the ones who live in compact centres and adapted premises of all sorts – like the school described above. Resentment at being rejected by the indigenous population can also prompt active protest, and manifest itself in crimes like theft and hooliganism. This, obviously, does not make things easier for the government, which is looking for every way possible to solve the refugee problem, including by facilitating their return home - though not very successfully

Even people who left behind substantial property and prestigious homes in Georgia are in no rush to say they will go back, despite their nostalgia for their old, normal, lives. There are many reasons for this. The Ossetian party to the negotiations articulated why: “Georgia must make a political and legal assessment of what happened in the war years, and the period of anti-Ossetian propaganda leading up to them. It must admit it committed genocide against the Ossetian people. People cannot go back to a place where, for example, their nearest and dearest were brutally murdered.

People need to go to a place where they are confident about their future. The legal authorisation for their return should address this moral dimension too. At first glance, it may seem irrelevant that Georgia be required to recognise and condemn its misdeeds, but for refugees who felt the impact of nationalism on their own skin, it is of paramount importance. Before they return home, there should be an effort to cleanse the air and punish the people who had a hand in thousands of personal tragedies for Ossetians. The state should formally repent for depriving more than 100,000 of its former inhabitants of the right to a normal life, and admit that it carried out genocide against its Ossetian people - not just pass a Law for the Restitution and Compensation of Lost Property. Despite its many promises, to date Georgia has yet to adopt a restitution law. The level of thinking in Georgia today is not yet sufficiently democratic to realise how important an admission of this kind is for Georgia itself, with its recent history of nationalism and fascism.

Until 1999, UNHCR was actively working on the return and re-settlement of refugees in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, but it switched to working on the return of Ossetian refugees to the Georgian interior, at the Georgian Government’s request – although under the Dagomys Agreement, the Georgian interior was not part of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, and local authorities were responsible for building homes for refugees there, not international organisations.

Gradually the statements of the Ad Hoc Special Committee of the Joint Supervisory Commission became more and more empty. It was increasingly the good offices of the South Ossetian component of the supervisory commission, allied with the South Ossetian Government, that made the return of refugees to South Ossetia possible. Between 1997 and 2000, over 400 Georgian families went back to Znaur district with the help of Ossetians in the commission and international organisations - or 70% of the ethnic Georgians who had quit the area during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. In the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinval itself, over 50 Georgian families got back their houses and flats, with the help of local authorities and international organisations.

The problem was that each side had different data for the numbers of Georgian refugees. In 1999, under the "Procedure for the Return...", the Georgian side sent lists of Georgians who had fled South Ossetia, which topped 10,000 names, whereas according to The Chair of the South Ossetian Migration Affairs Committee, Chochiev, there were no more than 5,000. The latest statistics of the Georgian Ministry for Refugee Affairs and Re-Settlement, say that 280,000 people from Abkhazia and 20,000 from South Ossetia are officially registered as refugees in Georgia and beyond its borders. In 1997, the Georgian side cited 5-6,000 ethnic Georgian refugees in Gori district. A detailed check by the Committee for Migration Affairs, however, showed that of 5,800 included on the list about 30% had never lived in Tskhinval, and many names appeared more than once.

As for ethnic Ossetian refugees who wanted to go back, the Georgian side gave permission to only four families to return to the Georgian interior in the course of 1997. The other 34 families were repatriated through the good offices of the UNHCR, without Georgian sanction.

In international law and practice, the right of return for people displaced by war, is central to the establishment of peace post-conflict. Several basic international treaties enshrine the right to voluntary repatriation. For example, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination (CERD) said in 1997 that "After their return to their original dwellings, all refugees and displaced peoples have the right to the restoration of property they lost during the conflict and the receipt of compensation for property that is irretrievable".

When Georgia joined the Council of Europe in 1999, it undertook to: "undertake all necessary legislative steps within two years of joining the Council, and all necessary administrative steps within three years, to enable the restoration of property and tenancy rights for people forced to abandon their homes during the conflicts between 1990-1994, or the payment of compensation for lost property that is irretrievable".

High principles like these were tiresome for the new Georgian 'Rose' leadership, which decided it would be faster, and most importantly, more their style, to tackle this problem along the lines of "Might is right". In the summer of 2004, Georgia embarked on a third wave of armed aggression against South Ossetia.

When Boris Chochiev, the South Ossetians' leader on the Joint Supervisory Commission, met the Head of the UNHCR Mission in Georgia in April 2004, he flagged up the many threats emanating from the new Georgian leadership to "resolve the South Ossetia problem by force". He asked if South Ossetia might witness a repeat of the Gala district events in Abkhazia, where in the course of repeated armed assaults, houses the UNHCR had re-built for Georgians were burned down in a matter of days.

The Georgian leadership's intentions for South Ossetia firmed up shortly after its May election victory in the one autonomous republic left to it: Adjara. On 31 May 2004, sub-divisions of the Georgian regular army, trained by NATO instructors and reinforcements of Special Purpose Troops from the Georgian Interior Ministry moved into the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, ostensibly to protect fiscal agencies from infringement by Russian Federation peacekeepers, under the command of General Nabzdorov. The "Rose Revolutionaries" were still on a high from their seizure of power and thought that popular support for President Kokoity in South Ossetia was on the ebb. They were sure that people would easily go over to Tbilisi's side and so decided to repeat their Adjarian triumph in South

Ossetia. On the pretext of preventing smuggling, they closed the Ergneti market on the South Ossetian-Georgian border, which had played a major stabilising role between the two sides.

The market came into being in the mid-1990s as a centre for trade in wholesale goods brought into South Ossetia from Russia. South Ossetia's level of economic development was low, and the price of production and consumer goods in Georgia was extremely high - so trading on the Ergneti market was a source of livelihood for an enormous number of families, both Ossetian and Georgian. It was also a place where ordinary people could make contact with each other and talk.

But disruption of this shared economic space with Georgia led the economies of South and North Ossetia to integrate even further.

The war on smuggling was accompanied by a so-called "humanitarian blitz", in which the Georgian leadership suddenly began showing an aggressive concern for the population of South Ossetia. First, lorries appeared bearing fertilisers that the owners of small landholdings would never need, particularly as the sowing season was long ago over. Then Ossetian pensioners with Russian pensions worth 50-70 US dollars a month were offered Georgian pensions of 14 laris (the equivalent of 7 US dollars). There were unsuccessful campaigns to take South Ossetian children to Georgian holiday resorts. Then after a large proportion of the Georgian population had been evacuated from the conflict zone, armed attacks began. A public opinion poll carried out in Tskhinval in July showed that 98.8% of the population was against the restoration of Georgian sovereignty over South Ossetia. 96% supported South Ossetian President Kokoity and 78% would personally take up arms if the need arose. These figures were given by the International Crisis Group in its 2005 Report. The Georgian side's economic blockade and aggression united the population of South Ossetia, and for 2.5 months that summer, it resisted its opponent's considerably greater strength.

On 19 August 2004, Georgian troops were withdrawn from the territory of South Ossetia. Georgia did not have the strength for a protracted war, that the armed resistance had threatened to become. The resistance also seriously threatened to complicate relations between Georgia and Russia, whose citizens almost all the South Ossetian population now were, and jeopardise international support.

The short war produced its own refugees. Mamitykæu village in Tskhinval district is a good example. The people who lived there had twice been forced out and had their houses destroyed and property raided by Georgian paramilitaries and people from neighbouring Georgian villages. Once again, like many people before them, they found safe haven in Tskhinval. The village has a tragic history. It was Mamitykæu, as eyewitnesses of the time testify, that was burned down in the first genocide of the 1920s.

In 1991 history repeated itself in every detail. Once again, it was one of the first to be burned down, because it was surrounded on all sides by ethnic Georgian villages. After peace was restored in South Ossetia, Mamitykæu's residents had not yet made up their minds to go back to live there. They were settled in Tskhinval and stayed there while making a few trips in spring and summer to work their landholdings and pick the harvest. In winter the village stood empty but for the nine houses where they Mamiev and Gabaraev families lived. In Georgia's new attack on South Ossetia in the summer of 2004, Mamitykæu village once again drained of people. Houses were taken apart by the Georgians, because there was nothing inside left to steal. The village was picked bare. Only the house walls remained. This year the people who used to live there did not even go to pick the fruit in their orchards.

A significant number of people who lived in the Ossetian villages of Dmenis, Sarabuk and Pris were subjected to intensive gunfire throughout the summer months and were also forced to leave their homes, many of which were partly or completely destroyed. In autumn 2004, when the summer of armed resistance had ended, the Ministry for Special Affairs registered 62 families from Kakheti, the

Pankisi Gorge and other Georgian districts and towns, who were forced to leave their homes as a result of a repeat wave of nationalism in the Georgian regions.

But still, an organised defence meant it was possible to avoid a flood of refugees, and leaving for South Ossetia was now less complicated than it had been in the first war. The uncertainty caused by 15 years' war and economic blockade meant that now at least one person in every South Ossetian family lived in North Ossetia. But the main thing was that South Ossetia was now continually aware of Russia's support.

Since the autumn of 2004 after the war, increased pressure from Europe and international organisations had forced Georgia to revive work on a restitution law.

Zenta Bestaeva, who not long ago was a refugee from the Ossetian village of Pris, worked briefly with international organisations in North Ossetia then suddenly became Minister of Civic Integration of Georgia. She was invited into the position by President Saakashvili, evidently as part of the "humanitarian blitz", and soon she took the most active part in the "show" repatriation – repatriation that was as showy as all President Saakashvili's initiatives.

Families who planned to go back to Georgia experienced definite hostility from refugees who wanted to stay. Still, they had definite for deciding to go back, after all they had been through. In August 2004 President Saakashvili signed a Decree, assigning 197,000 dollars' assistance to 25 Ossetian families who had agreed to go back to their pre-war homes. Responsibility for organising the re-settlement was placed on Zenta Bestaeva, within a UNHCR programme. These 25 were not voluntary repatriates, but families who had been subjected to numerous promises and blandishments, and decided to "give it a try, then say no if it doesn't work out".

Why did UNHCR and the Georgian Government choose to repatriate Ossetians in Mitarbi village in Borjomi district.? The village is a little distance from the other villages in the Gujareti Gorge and nearer to Borjomi. Unlike other villages, nearly everyone in Mitarbi speaks Georgian, and can adapt more easily because there are a lot of mixed families in the village. All this helped them decide, regardless of the fact that Mitarbi was the place where several Ossetians were sadistically murdered during the expulsions in 1991.

Zamira Chaisovna Diakonova-Margieva is from Didi Mitarbi village in Borjomi district, but now lives in the Zavodskoy refugee settlement in Vladikavkaz. She recounts that: "Greater Mitarbi (Didi Mitarbi - trans) is Ossetian, and the only Georgians who live there are wives and fiancées. But Georgian families live in Lesser Mitarbi (Patara Mitarbi – trans). We had a large family: my husband and I, our three children, and my mother-in-law. When it all started, we immediately sent our daughters away, wherever we could think of, because we were afraid for them. I sent my youngest daughter to North Ossetia with a neighbour, without even knowing where she had gone or how I would find her afterwards. We had distant relatives in Mikhailovskoye village in North Ossetia but I didn't have their address, or know where Mikhailovskoye actually was. But even that was alright, provided I could get her away from Mitarbi. My husband and son had gone off earlier to North Ossetia, taking some of our belongings with them, but where they were I also didn't know. I stayed behind with my elderly, paralysed mother-in-law. In April Georgians came to our village house and took away all our livestock – 5 cows and a horse – while I was out of the house. When I came back I cried, and decided to go and look for them. I thought I should go to the Georgian village of Kimot (Kimotesubani - trans). Ossetians had always lived there, but gradually it filled up with Georgians. I got there at nightfall, and found the cowshed where the Georgians kept all the livestock they had raided from Ossetians. I saw new-born calves that were dead. I didn't find my own cattle, and was not going to take other people. I went on to the next village, Mzetamze, and suddenly found our horse – or truer to say, she saw me and tried to bolt towards me, but she was tethered to the ground. I untied her

and led her away as fast as I could, not believing my luck. The Georgians spotted me, and took away my horse. I stood there for a while and watched, then went away. I was really sorry about the horse, sorrier than about the cows. She was beautiful, and very intelligent.

I came home empty-handed. I found the front door smashed in, everything ransacked, and my mother-in-law lying on the floor. While I was out Georgians had come round again, tipped my mother-in-law on the floor and said they were looking for weapons under the bed. I got her back between the blankets and ran to a neighbour's house, where we agreed we would flee the village. Georgians burst in on us, once again back in the village. They took away my neighbour's passport and asked for her savings book. Hoping to avoid a looting, my neighbour told them proudly "My nephew is a Georgian extremist too!" - you have to laugh - but they just cursed her roundly and proceeded to trample and break all her things. They intended to take me away with them, so I told them, just in case, that my surname was Diakonashvili – hoping the 'shvili' would help. And I was lucky. It turned out one of their friends was a Diakonashvili, and they left me alone. Almost all of us had names that ended in 'shvili' and we all spoke excellent Georgian – but did it do us any good?

Mitarbi was the nearest village to Borjomi, and was paid most visits by the Georgians. In total they drove away 43 KamAZ lorry-loads of property from the village. My neighbour and I found a car and jointly paid all our last cash for it. My mother-in-law didn't want to come. She felt embarrassed because she was old and bedbound. I had to leave her with her elderly brother in Borjomi and two months later they took her to relatives in Stavropol in southern Russia, where she died.

Do I want to go back? After all that? Last year, Zenta Bestaeva the Georgian Minister for Refugees often came to see us and tried to talk us into returning. She managed to persuade the Plievs and the Kumaritovs to go back – 4 households in all. Georgians had been occupying their houses, so they were still in one piece. The Government did up their houses and gave them each a cow, five chickens, furniture, crockery and even tooth brushes. But they all moved back here".

Story No 10: "Why did I come back?"



Ibragim Ilyich Kumaritov comes from Greater Mitarbi (Didi Mitarbi – trans) and went back to Georgia under the Presidential Programme on 'returns'. But he has returned to North Ossetia and now lives in Iry-kæu village near Vladikavkaz. Why did he agree to go back to Georgia?

"I speak fluent Georgian and I have many Georgian relatives. My daughter-in-law is Georgian, two of my daughters are married to Georgians in Mitarbi. The whole of my extended family – my wife, mother, two sons, daughter-in-law and granddaughter- all lived together in Mitarbi, and worked on the state farm. We had a large timber house, with an extensive garden plot and we had bought construction materials because we were planning to build a new house, that would be bigger. We had a pretty substantial concern: 11 head of large, horned cattle; 25 smaller cattle; many hens and pigs. We had a 'Gaz-69' car. We were wealthy, and used to trade cheese on the market, wool, and all sorts of livestock. When even I began to find it hard to live with the Georgians, despite all my family ties with them, it was out of the question for other people. I didn't have time to ship out any of my property – they looted and marauded the lot. We left with what we stood up in. We had even

lost all our papers.

When I got here I soon realised I wouldn't last long. It wasn't that we were living in tourist centres and odd little corners. I have asthma and the best place on earth for me is my native village of Mitarbi, where I can breathe properly and feel human. The air here is not right for me. How have I managed to stand it for so many years? I agreed to go back, so I could breathe Mitarbi air again. To be honest I thought I would also get back our old house at the same time and transfer the title deeds to my daughter – then come back here to die.

Zenta Bestaeva drove us to Mitarbi, where President Saakashvili was already waiting with five journalists, and made a speech. Some Georgian was living in my house. He was immediately escorted out, and the house was renovated from top to bottom. Exceptionally, I immediately received a passport and Georgian citizenship, by decree of Saakashvili. I was also promised money: 5,000 US dollars but got 4,000 Georgian Lari¹⁴, and then only a month later. They gave us all the necessary furniture, a cow and a calf. The village at that time also had electric lighting, which amazed the local Georgians who lived there. I was glad I could breathe again, and during my time there I had no trouble with my health. What was the atmosphere like? It seemed OK, but you never know when that will change and all the time you are on the q.v. for trouble. As I didn't manage to transfer the title deeds of the house, I even tried to sell it and stayed on until December. The electric lighting, by the way, was very quickly cut off, and there were no roads in the winter. At the moment it is very hard to live there. I came back here, and left a female relative in the Mitarbi house. I spent winter here in Vladikavkaz but now my shortage of breath has come back and I would like to go over to Mitarbi again, to restore my health and see the house. But my passport expired back in 1991. Last year I crossed the border with my refugee ID card, but now that has been taken away from me, and with a Georgian passport they will never let me back here. I haven't managed to get a Russian passport yet, so I don't know if I will ever manage to get back to Mitarbi again. At the moment we are all living together in one small house: I, my 92-year-old mother, my unmarried son and my sister.

Who else went back to Mitarbi? It's better not to name them, because people think we are traitors as it is. There is one family there at the moment. They took their children there for a summer holiday and will soon come back. The children have to start school, and anyway it is not easy being in Mitarbi now. Nothing feels like home, somehow”.

¹⁴ Approximately \$2,000 - author

Incidentally, Ibragim Kumaritov is right to emphasise that “he lost more than one cow” – meaning the compensation he received was less than the value of property he had lost. With a farmer’s exactitude, each refugee can tell you from memory exactly what they lost.

Lyubov Dzhambolovna Dzhigkaeva-Plieva from Gujareti village in Borjomi district, told us about all the property she had lost. “We had a large brick-built house, with four rooms of 25 square metres each. Later the Georgians removed the sheet metal from the roof and replaced it with corrugated asbestos. Georgians live in the house over summer and in winter it stands empty. On our farm we had 4 cows, 35 sheep, 4 pigs, 12 piglets, hens, about 100 geese, and odds and sods. Once a week I used to go to Borjomi market and sell cheese for 3 roubles a kilogram, (Ossetian cheese was always cheaper than other people’s), chickens, piglets and calves. Every spring I would sell 12-13 lambs. We threshed all our own hay ourselves, first for the collective farm then for our own needs. Some people had cars – small “Moskvich” or models made in the Urals. If they were physically able, people worked hard and made a good living. I lived with my two sons, my daughter-in-law and three grandsons of school age.

The first thing to go was the middle school that used to teach in Ossetic and Russian. In September 1990 the children had already stopped going to school and the teachers moved away. There were only two schools; one in Gverdisubani and one in Gujareti. Some people took their children to relatives in Vladikavkaz, so they could go to school there. Other children simply didn’t go to school. My family also moved away with their children. I stayed behind to keep an eye on the house. In April, Georgians started coming to the village. The first time five of them came, walked into the house and pointed machine guns at me. They demanded money, weapons, insulted me and shouted. Afterwards I went straight to Tsaqveri village to look for someone who could give me a lift. I went back only next morning and saw that the Georgians had bundled the local Ossetians into a car, loaded it with things, and taken them to Tsaqveri where they unloaded them and told them to clear out. I got onto the train for Borjomi with three other women, then made for Tbilisi, and from there to Vladikavkaz. I spent five years living in the “Redant” holiday centre and since then I have been here. My daughter-in-law got a room that the factory provided. Five of us used to live in the one room, then we got a second room”.

Lyuba complains that she can’t get used to the hostel: it is dirty, noisy, cramped, and scruffy. The psychological drawbacks are worse than the physical ones. Three of her older brothers died in the Second World War. “And what for?” she asks. She has no Georgian – she went to an Ossetian school. She was lucky, because it was the last year for Ossetic-language teaching. Afterwards all the Ossetic-language schools in Georgia went over to Georgian and children who did not even know the Georgian alphabet, received a phantom intermediary education. Will she go back if the conditions are right? “God no! Why would you go back to your enemies?”

Refugees had a definite reason for refusing to go back. If there was a choice between being a refugee amongst one’s own people and a beggar with no rights among strangers, they opted for being with their own people, because at least you could overcome being a refugee. You can start life over from scratch if you have the help of people close to you.

In conclusion...

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Bortsvana village
Boshuri village
Chanchakha village
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Didtavi village
Dre village
Ergneti village
Gagiuantubani village
Gaichaantubani village
Ghvedreti village
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Ikvnevi village
Ipnara village
Kere village
Khandisi village
Kintsvisi village
Koshkebi village
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Kemerovo city
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Kursk Region
Leninakan city
Leningrad city (St. Petersburg)
Magadan Region
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Toponymical reference table for South Ossetia

Ossetian name / Cyrillic-English transliteration	Ossetian name / Ossetic Latin alphabet (1923)	IPA transcription	Georgian name / Georgian-English transliteration
Dzau District			
Dzau town	Dzau	[dzau]	Java
Dzhalabet village	Džalabet	[dʒalabet]	Jalabeti
Kvaisa town	Khvaisa	[k'vaisa]	Kvaisi
Khakhet village	Xaxet	[xaxet]	Khakheti
Mugut village	Mugut	[mugut]	Muguti
Leningor District			
Leningor town	Leningor	[leningor]	Akhagori
Monaster village	Monaster	[monaster]	Monasteri
Tsinagar village	Chinagar	[ts'inagar]	Tsinagari
Tsold village	Chold	[ts'old]	Tsolda
Tskhinval District			
Akhalisa village	Axalisa	[axalisa]	Akhalisa
Andoret village	Andoret	[andoret]	Andoreti
Artseu village	Arceu	[artseu]	Artcevi
Bender village	Bender	[bender]	Benderi
Berula village	Berula	[berula]	Berula
Bikar village	Bikhar	[bik'ar]	Bikari
Budzhitykaeu village	Budžity qæu	[budʒiti qeu]	N/A
Ch'ekh village	Čhex	[tʃ'ex]	Kekhvi
Dmenis village	Dmenis	[dmenis]	Dmenisi
Eltura village	Eltura	[eltura]	Eltura
Ered village	Ered	[ered]	Eredvi
Goret village	Goret	[goret]	Goreti
Grom village	Grom	[grom]	Ghromi
Gudzhabaur village	Gudžabaur	[gudʒabaur]	Gudjabauri
Kheit village	Xeit	[xeit]	Kheiti
Khelchua village	Xelčua	[xeltʃua]	Khelchua
Ksuis village	Ksuis	[ksuis]	Ksuisi
Kurta village	Kurta	[kurta]	Kurta
Mamisantuban village	Mamisantuban	[mamisantuban]	Mamisaantubani
Mamitykaeu village	Mamity qæu	[mamii qeu]	Mamita
Monaster village	Monaster	[monaster]	Monasteri
Nog-Kaeu village	Nog -Qæu	[nog qeu]	Nog-Kau
Otreu village	Otreu	[otreu]	Otrevi
Pris village	Pris	[pris]	Prisi
Saba village	Saba	[saba]	Sabuye
Sarabuk village	Sarabukh	[sarabukʰ]	Sarabuki
Satihar village	Satihar	[satiqar]	Satikhari
Tamars village	Tamars	[tamars]	Tamarasheni
Tbet village	Thbet	[t'bet]	Tbeti
Tliakana village	Thliakhana	[t'liakana]	Tliakana
Tskhinval city (Ch'reba)	Cxinval	[tsxinval]	Tskhinvali
Tsunar village (Khetagurovo)	Chunar	[ts'unar]	Tsunari (Khetagurovi)
Ruk tunnel	Rukh	[rukʰ]	Roki
Zar village	Zar	[ʒar]	Dzari
Znaur District			
Auneu village	Auneu	[auneu]	Avnevi
Balta village	Balta	[balta]	Balta
Bekmar village	Beqmar	[beqmar]	Beqmari
Didmukha village	Didmuxa	[didmuxa]	Didmukha
Ioncha village	Ionča	[iontʃa]	Ioncha
Kalet village	Khalet	[k'alet]	Kaleti
Kornis village	Qornis	[qornis]	Kornisi
Prineu village	Prineu	[prinev]	Prinevi

Velit village (Velebi)
Znaur town

Velit (Velebi)
Znaur

[velit] ([velebi])
[znaur]

Veleebi
Znauri

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