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Tom Trier, Hedvig Lohm, David Szakonyi. *Under Siege: Inter-Ethnic Relations in Abkhazia.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xi + 159 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70130-3.

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This succinct volume by Tom Trier, Hedvig Lohm, and David Szakonyi contributes to the comparative study of mass violence by providing a clearly set out survey of inter-ethnic relations within Abkhazia, a breakaway post-Soviet republic in the Caucasus that remains part of the Georgian state under international law but from which most of the Georgian population were expelled during the conflict of 1992-93 and a second armed expulsion in 1998. The authors, whose backgrounds combine social anthropology, political science, and journalism, have all worked as researchers for the European Centre for Minority Issues, and the book is aimed at policy and development practitioners as well as an academic audience.

The rationale for their study is stated early on: "While much attention has recently been given by the mass media and in academic circles to the tripartite relations between Georgia, Russia and the breakaway regions [of Abkhazia and South Ossetia]–justifiably in light of the August 2008 war–little is known about the internal situations of the two disputed territories" (p. 2). *Under Siege* is thus positioned as a book for the outside observer in need of a quick injection of knowledge about Abkhazia. This injection is provided through four chapters showing the political, economic, and social dimensions of Abkhazian public life, a milieu that twenty years after the initial violence of Abkhazia's recursive secession remains heavily structured by ethnopolitics and a clientelism that itself privileges Abkhaz-identified elites over the representatives of other groups in terms of political and legal participation.

An initial chapter on "The *De Facto* State of Abkhazia"–*de facto* being the republic's status under international law–briefly describes the contemporary entity and the main political actors within it. This chapter's title, and the book's language in general, indicates that to strive for objectivity in representing the Abkhaz/Georgian conflict requires a certain delicacy of expression. As with many conflicts, the choice of whether to describe the Georgians expelled from Abkhazia to so-called Georgia proper as "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs) or "refugees" implicates any writer in taking a political position through language: to term them "refugees" is to imply that they have crossed a border between states and therefore that Abkhazia's claim to statehood is valid, whereas to term them "IDPs" implies that there could have been no such crossing of an international border because all the territory remains part of the Georgian state. Since *Under Siege* focuses on internal affairs within Abkhazia, its task is not in fact to deal with these Georgian refugees/IDPs in depth, except with those expellees who continued to engage in circular migration to the southernmost part of Abkhazia until the closure of the border with Georgia in 2008.

Chapter 2, titled "Demography," also serves to deliver all the historical background that the authors consider necessary for an understanding of contemporary Abkhazia. Again in common with many other conflicts, historically and archaeologically based claims to territory have served as a resource for contemporary political claims by intellectuals and politicians on both sides: the Georgian interpretation is that the indigenous inhabitants of Abkhazia were proto-Georgians, while pro-Abkhaz historians claim that the primordial residents were the Apsua people (ancestors of today's Abkhaz) and that Georgians only came to settle there during the late Middle Ages and the resettlement programs of Tsarist Russia. Abkhazia's history thus in large part becomes a history of the statistical "manipulation of demography" since the late nineteenth century (p. 19). While there is no chapter solely dedicated to giving an account of the 1992-93 war or the crisis leading up to it, chapter 2 does present its demographic consequences, ending with an evaluation of the Abkhazian government's policy to increase the dwindling population by encouraging the return migration of the *mujahirs*, descendants of Abkhazians who were forced to leave the area during the

wars between Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

The final two chapters present contemporary political problems. Chapter 3 covers the situation of the remaining Georgians (members of the Megrelian subgroup) in the district known to Georgians as Gali and to Abkhazians as Gal. This was the only part of Abkhazia to which displaced Georgians were allowed to return, "[d]ue to the absence of warfare … in 1992-93 and, therefore, the lack of involvement of the local population in the armed hostilities" (p. 45). An anthropological lens is helpful here in explaining the situational identities and strategic behavior of Megrelians. The final chapter covers various areas of public life in which non-Abkhaz inhabitants may face discrimination. These include political representation, the media, property rights, citizenship laws, civil society, and religion, but the richest illustration of contemporary inter-ethnic relations in Abkhazia is given through the author's analysis of language policy.

Although Abkhaz is constitutionally the official language and its promotion "is considered a patriotic duty," the social reality is that "non-Abkhaz residents do not speak Abkhaz, which is also the case for a sizeable portion of the ethnic Abkhaz population" (pp. 58-59). Day-to-day communication is frequently in Russian. In 2007, however, the Abkhazian parliament passed a law under which all administrators, high-level officials, school directors, and judges will be required to use Abkhaz. Such a policy, the authors make clear, would result in considerable indirect discrimination against non-Abkhazian inhabitants as well as practical difficulties for non-Abkhaz-speaking Abkhazians who may struggle to access language classes in time. The human rights implications of this language policy are clearly drawn out through the rest of the chapter. A subsection on language teaching in Lower Gal/Gali hints at methodological difficulties in pursuing this subject further: "Due to the political sensitivity of the language question, most teachers are reluctant to discuss what languages they use for teaching" (p. 71)–a sociolinguistic research question that would seem much more routine in a context with a more strongly established framework of minority language rights.

Under Siege does not attempt to contribute to a theoretical understanding of mass violence and genocide. It can nevertheless be productively read in dialogue with these perspectives: the attention to internal dynamics within a three-way system of political and military tension recalls Rogers Brubaker's attention to the internal representational struggles within ethnopolitical entities in his *Nationalism Reframed*, though this is not a book that seeks to deconstruct the production of "ethnic identity" in the manner of Brubaker's later work.[1] Neither is it a history book, although contested histories are very visible in Abkhazian/Georgian politics. The reader is told that tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians have arisen from the 1980s, the 1992-93 war, and their postwar experiences, but also from "Abkhaz fears–already nurtured at the beginning of the twentieth century and intensified during the Stalin period"–of forced assimilation at the hands of Georgians (p. 9). These, not to mention World War II, are periods about which the reader could stand to know much more. *Under Siege* will nonetheless be a useful addition to research libraries involved with the study of mass violence, especially of central and eastern Europe and the former USSR. Its illustrations of demographic disputes, of ethnicized language policy, of situational ethnic identities, and of displacement and property takeover after armed conflict make it possible to refer to Abkhazia alongside the much more commonly researched conflicts on which more literature exists.

Note

[1]. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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