Research Note

THE CLASH OF MYTHS

A Review of *The Value of the Past:*
Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia
by Victor A. Shnirelman

Vladimir ROUVINSKI

Graduate Student

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation (IDEC),

Hiroshima University

1-5-1 Kagamiyama, Higashi Hiroshima, 739-8529, Japan

E-mail: vladruv@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

Masatsugu MATSUO

Professor

Institute for Peace Science (IPSHU)

and

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation (IDEC),

Hiroshima University

1-1-89 Higashisendamachi, Naka-ku, Hiroshima, 730-0053, Japan

E-mail: xmatsuo@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

Abstract

In ethnic conflicts of the former Soviet Transcaucasia, each conflicting group is trying its best to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claims mainly by the criteria of homeland and language. Such choice of criteria is based on Soviet practice, when ethnic groups could enjoy degrees of privilege of territorial political autonomy only when they were considered to be indigenous ethnic groups of the territories in question. Thus, most of the ethnic groups had to show that they were an autochthonous population in a particular territory which had continued to live there using their own language from the very beginning of their existence as a unique ethnic group.

Victor A. Shnirelman's recent book, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*, examines in great detail the process of how one or another ethnic group was trying hard to reinterpret and rewrite its own history in order to prove its autochthonousness and continued use of its own language, and, eventually, to create a new ethnogenetic myth. However, a myth of ethnogenesis of one group often clashed with that of another - often a rival group. The clash set in motion another cycle of historical reinterpretation and rewriting, pushing the parties further and further back into the past.

While the book provides us with rich and complex information concerning the whole process, it seems that the author is a little too much interested in the rich details of the practice of rewriting history to consider the issue of generalization. In this review, therefore, we have tried to describe an approach to

formulate a theoretical framework in which Shnirelman's thick descriptions can be generalized and placed in a proper theoretical perspective, and which enhance, rather then reduce, the value of precious raw materials of the volume.

1. Introduction

> "Who controls the past controls the future:
> who controls the present controls the past."
>
> George Orwell, *1984*

The job of Winston Smith, the main character of *1984* written by George Orwell more than half a century ago, is to rewrite historical events so that everyone in "Oceania", one of the book's three great powers, knows the past in the way the Party wants them to know it. Smith is worried that some day no one will ever be able to distinguish between true and imagined realities of the past since Big Brother wants history to be changed constantly in accordance with the present needs. However, the Party understands how important it is to have the "right" image of the past in order to control people's minds, and would never give up its control of the knowledge of the past. The importance of "correct" historical interpretation for current developments is not only a feature of Orwell's fictitious leadership but it is also an essential characteristic for real leaders of our time. Therefore, it is no coincidence that one of the books by Victor A. Shnirelman was given the title *Who Gets the Past?* (Shnirelman, 1996). The book explored the relationships between the search for an "appropriate" historical past by the academic intelligentsia and modern political development in the Russian Federation.

In this review of the same author's *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*, we concentrate our efforts on the discussion of the complex processes of repeated reinterpretation of the distant past and the rewriting of history by rival ethnic groups for political purposes in the Transcaucasian region of the post-Soviet geopolitical space. This region remains very far from political tranquility even today, more than ten years after the collapse of the USSR. Moreover, it is true to say that during the last hundreds of years, various ethnic groups that happened to be in this part of the globe had to struggle for their presence in the region, often including the struggle for physical survival. Therefore, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the interpretation of the past in this region - the core of the investigation by Shnirelman.

2. The Army of Myths

In the book, Shnirelman deals with three ethnic conflicts in Transcaucasia that eventually deteriorated into violent armed ones: Armenian-Azerbaijani, Georgian-Abkhazian, and the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts although the bulk of the book is devoted to the first two conflicts (see **Map 1** for geography, **Table 1** and **Table 2** for chronology of the conflicts). Actually, all three armed conflicts broke out after the collapse of the Soviet Union but Shnirelman covers the whole Soviet era leading up to the final breakout of the ethnic wars. It is because the Soviet era paved the way to the conflicts in that, under the Soviet federal structure and its nationalities policy, "authentic indigenous ethnic groups" (Shnirelman 2001a, 4) alone could enjoy various degrees of political autonomy even if the autonomy was nominal at times. Thus, ethnic groups (or nationalities) had to try their best in demonstrating that they were eligible for

such political privilege. Their efforts were directed to the past, since history was the only mean of showing that the ethnic group in question was authentic and indigenous.

Map 1 Transcaucasia
source: adapted from S. I. Griffiths (1993), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict:*
Threats to European Security, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 75

Table 1. Brief Chronology of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict

1915-1918	Genocide of Armenians in Turkey (estimated number of deaths is 1,5 million)
1918	Federative Democratic Republic of Transcaucasia (collapsed the same year)
1918-1920	Independent Republic of Azerbaijan (formally independent till 1922)
1918-1920	Independent Republic of Armenia (formally independent till 1922)
1919-1920	Atrocities against Muslims in Baku
1918-1920	Armed clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops over Karabakh
1922	Azerbaijan and Armenia joined the USSR as members of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (TSFSR)
1923	Nagorno-Karabakh is given status of an autonomous region
1924	Nakhichevan is given status of autonomous region within Azerbaijan
1936	Azerbaijan and Armenia are given status of full Soviet Socialist Republics after TSFSR is disembodied
1988	Nagorno-Karabakh Regional Soviet demands unification with Armenia (three times during the course of the year)
1988 (Dec)	Devastating earthquake in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh
1989 (Jan)	Direct Presidential (USSR) Rule introduced to Nagorno-Karabakh
1989 (Jan)	Azerbaijan establishes economic blockade against Armenia

1989 (Nov)	Direct Presidential Rule ends
1989 (Dec)	Nagorno-Karabakh declares its annexation to Armenia
1991 (Dec)	Nakhichevan declares its independence
1992 (May)	Open warfare begins in Nagorno-Karabakh spreading out later to other areas
1993 (Oct)	First cease-fire followed by the other two (in 1994)
1996	Minsk Conference (co-chaired by the US, Russia, and France) is established to negotiate a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan

Source: Adapted from O'Ballance (1997), Shnirelman (2001a), and others

Table 2. Brief Chronology of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-S.Ossetian Conflicts

1918-1921	Independent Georgian Republic
1921 (Mar)	Abkhazia declared independent Soviet Socialist Republic
1921 (Dec)	Abkhazia signed a federation treaty with Georgia
1922	A new entity - South Ossetia - is created and given status of an autonomous region
1931	Abkhazia's status is downgraded to an autonomous republic
1936	Georgia is given status of a full Soviet Socialist Republic as TSFSR is disembodied
1990 (Aug)	Abkhazia declares its independence from Georgia
1990 (Sep)	South Ossetia *ex parte* upgrades its status to a full Soviet Socialist Republic
1991	Abkhazia holds independent elections
1992 (Jan)	Armed clashes between Georgia and South Ossetia begin
1992 (Oct)	Armed clashes between Georgia and Abkhazia begin
1992 (Nov)	South Ossetia votes to secede from Georgia
1993 (Aug)	Georgian troops are driven out of Sukhumi
1993 (Nov)	Russian-Ukrainian peacekeeping troops arrive in Abkhazia
1993 (Dec)	Georgian-Abkhazian agreement is signed
1994 (Feb)	Abkhazia declared independent state
1994 (Nov)	New Constitution of Abkhasia is adopted
1995 (May)	New Constitution of Georgia is adopted (status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not defined)
1998-2002	Russia-sponsored campaign for obtaining second (Russian) citizenship by residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
2002	Peacekeeping troops leave Abkhazia

Source: Adapted from O'Ballance (1997), Shnirelman (2001a), and others

Consequently, ethnogenesis had a very important political meaning. Usually, the story would have ended once such history was written for an ethnic group. During the Soviet era, however, one's past had been rewritten again and again because of the two following factors. First, the policy principles of Moscow often changed with the change of leaders. The history of an ethnic group had to be rewritten according to new principles (or dogma). Secondly, the histories of ethnic groups, especially those of neighboring rival groups, often contradicted each other, or completely ignored the historical existence of the other group(s), and one ethnic group had to come up with a new version of its history in order to refute the rival's history. It set in motion a whole chain of action-reaction of historical revision. It is this

mutual interactive process that Shnirelman is interested in, and he describes in every detail how new images and interpretations of the past of the ethnic groups in question were produced by distinguished scholars and approved by political leaders in Moscow (and/or at the capitals of republics and other autonomous units) so as to be subsequently disseminated and inculcated through the mass media and education. The richness of detail that fills the four hundred pages of the book is truly overwhelming.

Shnirelman convincingly shows that the new images and interpretations of the history of the ethnic groups reflected political imperatives of the authorities at the time, that they often competed with and even contradicted each other, and that they did not necessarily correspond to the available historical evidence. But, as Walker Connor says, "it is not *what is*, but *what people believe is* that has behavioral consequences" (Connor, 1987, 206; emphasis in the original). Here, we follow Connor in the use of the term "myth."

By "myth" we mean a belief to one's origin and history, which is not necessarily "what is" and which is of political significance. And we refer to the process of reinterpreting and rewriting the history of one's own ethnic group simply as to "myth formation" or "myth production."

3. Soviet Federal Structure and Nationalities Policy

Before we discuss the role of historical interpretations in Transcaucasian ethnic conflicts, a brief review of the Soviet nationalities policy is necessary as a background. After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution the nationalities policy became a priority agenda for Moscow rulers, who had succeeded, very effectively, in creating a "state of nations" (Suny and Martin, 2001), where an ethnic group was granted various degrees of political autonomy over a certain territory, usually its ethnic homeland.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics consisted of fifteen republics. What is important for us is that the republics were established on an ethnic basis, that is, fifteen major ethnic groups were granted the right to have a supreme form of an ethnic unit, the "full" republic. They were "titular" nations of the republics. Other ethnic groups had to settle for the lower forms in the hierarchy of the federal structure - autonomous republics and autonomous regions. Moreover, there were others who were not granted any such status. The status of an ethnic group in this hierarchy was not permanent. The same ethnic group could be granted some significant rights at one time and be deprived of those same rights at another. Thus, the federal structure was inseparably linked with the Soviet nationalities policy and the fate of an ethnic group largely depended upon the position in the federal structure. Shnirelman notes that:

> Being deprived of any personal political freedom, people linked their future with
> a future of their ethno-administrative unit or a political status of their ethnic group in
> general. Therefore, ethnicity served [as] a very important political resource, and
> [people were very sensitive to any changes in ethnic status] (Shnirelman, 2001b, 2).

Thus, the Soviet federal structure and nationalities policy provided a fertile ground for ethnic rivalries, or even ethnic conflicts - an opposition, which is about the status of an ethnic group (Kaufman, 2001).

When we discuss the nationalities policy in the USSR, it is necessary to mention the "dual effects of Soviet nationality policies - its nation-making and its nation-breaking aspects" (Suny and Martin, 2001, 16), or, rephrasing the title of the Connor's (1972) famous article, its "nation-building or nation-destroy-

ing" aspects. In the language aspect of that policy, the duality of the Soviet approach was expressed through the bipolarity of the language policy in the republics, i.e. its indigenization (korenizatsia) and internationalization (Russification) sides. It is easy to see that, with very few exceptions, the periods of intensification or abatement either of korenizatsia or Russification correspond in Transcaucasia to Shnirelman's periodization of the process of ethnogenetic mythology creation. For example, during the first stage the emphasis on local titular languages became very strong compared to the Russian language, while the study of Russian in school became obligatory during the third stage. The collapse of the USSR and the emergence of newly independent states meant the end of the policy of Russification. And in an ethnic competition or ethnic conflict the role of language as a permanent ethnic marker is crucial. The Transcaucasian examples of Karabakh, Nakhichevan[1], and Abkhazia present a clear confirmation for this thesis, as Shnirelman shows. In all of those conflicts the discussions about language preceded *vi et armis*.

According to Shnirelman (1998), it is possible to name five consecutive stages in the process of politicized ethnogenetic mythology formation.

The first stage falls into the period of the 1920s. This phase can be characterized as a struggle of ethnic elites for the right to acquire ethno-political status or to maintain/upgrade it for their respective ethnic groups. The struggle took place because at that juncture the internal politico-administrative structure of the USSR was not clearly defined yet. The process shaped up through the building of idealized historical versions that ascribed great doings in the past to a particular ethnic group, sometimes even usurping other people's historical past known from ancient written sources (Shnirelman, 1998, 67-68).

In contrast, the second stage (turn of the 1920s) can be described as the period of intensive introduction of Marxism in Soviet science. "Internationalism in Science", understood as the study of global universality of the logic of development in order to confirm the inevitability of the coming world unity based on the communist principles, had swayed the day. Thus, to study the historical process of one or another ethnic group separately from the historical process *in toto* meant to risk being accused of a "bourgeois nationalist deviation." One was supposed to conceive ethnogenesis as an endless process of mixing between various ethnic groups for what eventually would end with a transformation of one people into the other through, of course, the change of socio-economic formations. At this time, a famous archaeologist and linguist Nikolai Marr formulates his "ethnogonia" theory (a part of his "New Linguistics" theories) based on the idea that all ethnic groups evolve in one uniform development and in close contact with each other so that they "naturally" integrate into a "uniform historical entity." However, the second part of the 1930s marked the beginning of the next stage in the process of ethnogenetic myth formation in the USSR (Shnirelman, 1998, 69-70).

The third stage signifies a shift to what can be called "all-Soviet nationalism", and to what turned out to be, on the one hand, a new version of Russian chauvinism and, on the other, a blow to regional ethnic nationalisms. Moscow needed a solid historical base for the Soviet state. Therefore, the schools of internationalists (such as of Mikhail Petrovskiy) and autochthonists (Nikolai Marr) were strongly criticized by the authorities, and many were physically eliminated during the terror at the end of the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Russian pre-revolution historical tradition was partly rehabilitated and scientists regenerated the search for the historical roots of the Russian people, Russian statehood, and the origins of Slavs[2].

The next, fourth stage, begins in the first part of the 1950s, when the existence of two rather competing approaches - "all-Soviet nationalism" and republican ethnic nationalism - becomes evident. The

competition is one of the manifestations of the discontent in some regions of the Soviet Union, in particular, in Caucasus and Central Asia, concerning inadequacy between the economic and demographic potential in the republics and of different ethnic groups, on the one hand, and their respective political status, on the other. Referring to that dissonance, Shnirelman identifies the situation in the USSR as "ethnic discrimination embedded into the Soviet federal structure" (Shnirelman, 2001b, 1).

As stated above, not all ethnic groups in the USSR were given even the lowest form of autonomy. And some were dissatisfied with the status they had. In Transcaucasia, the first type can be illustrated by the struggle of the Talysh people for having their own statehood[3], and the second type by the contemporary history of the Abkhazian people. Generally speaking, there is no surprise at all that the decay of the Soviet Union generated a blossom of new ethnogenetic mythologies, which helped to legitimize the nation-building process in the newly independent states. The new myths were a clear reflection of that process. Moreover, often they were a reflection of interethnic conflicts as well, since those conflicts frequently took place in parallel with the nation building process and were the result of "group ethnic confrontation" detonated by the "ethnic discrimination embedded into the federal structure." This is the main characteristic of the fifth stage in the development of politicized myth formation.

This brief description of Shnirelman's periodization shows that the Soviet federal structure had two contradictory thrusts: internationalization and indigenization.

Though Shnirelman doesn't explore the issue directly, his discussion of the Soviet federal structure and nationalities policies leads to a broader issue - the co-existence of nationalist and communist ideologies in the Soviet Union. In general, the authorities in the USSR were never afraid of descending to use nationalist dispositions when it was necessary. Nationalism and communism may seem to be, *prima facie*, incompatible ideologies, but their approaches are often surprisingly similar. Not mistakenly, Ernest Gellner placed them together by characterizing Marxism and nationalism as "two of the great myths of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[4] However, while Marxism has obviously lost its former political influence at the turn of the 21st century, nationalist ideologies, fed frequently by the myths of the distant past, are acquiring new power in many parts of the world.

As shown by Shnirelman, nationalist ideologies were developing in parallel with the existing communist ideology in the USSR. Such a situation reflected the "dual effects of Soviet nationalities policies." The specifics of Shnirelman's work is that he confirms the thesis by showing real "live" personalities of the process, for instance, by describing "double-faced" Transcaucasian politicians, many of whom are still (or *de integro*) at the wheel of their respective ethnic communities. Their usual tactics were to publicly criticize nationalistically-oriented researchers in order to please Moscow by showing their struggle against nationalism. At the same time, normally none of those historians would lose their positions, since, despite public criticism, their approach had the moral support of the local authorities. Not surprisingly, many Soviet time scholars have now joined the political elites of the newly independent states and still more have now free hands in performing the role of "Knights of Truth", reanimating old myths of the past to serve the interests of the present. Nationalist ideologies never died in the republics of the USSR. Therefore, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, for the local ethnic elites, it was very easy to switch from the use of communist phraseology to that of nationalism, especially when nationalism became internationally accepted as the main principle legitimizing independent statehood.

4. Myths and Foreign Policy's Goals

As delineated above, Soviet practices, especially the nationalities policies, had directly affected the process of myth formation. At the same time, even the foreign policy of the Soviet state did affect the myths of ethnogenesis, for example, when the issue of the ethnic identities of Transcaucasian peoples was used for the purpose of the Soviet foreign policy towards Turkey and Iran, particularly, from the mid 1940s through the first part of 1950s. Let us discuss this aspect next.

After the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union acquired Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia. These examples inspired many Azeris and Armenians. The first were hoping for unification with Azeris in Iran and the latter were hoping for restoration of the Armenian territories in Turkey. Shnirelman (2001a, 75-79, 107-109) has managed to puzzle out a web of Moscow, Azeri and Armenian interests at that time and pointed out the ways how each party was trying to achieve its goals in that dangerous game. Of course, at the center of his attention is the main character of the book, the image of the past.

It is no secret that after the annexation of the territories in Europe, Stalin was thinking about the USSR expansion southward. The primary targets were Turkey and Iran. The territory of Northern Iran seemed to be an easy trophy since many Azeris lived there and Soviet troops were already there[5]. Historians in Moscow and Azerbaijan were given an instruction to search for the ancient roots of the Azeri people in order to prove the existence of pan-Azeri identity, common for Azeris in both Soviet and Iranian Azerbaijans. Although not satisfying the purposes of justifying Azeri as autochthonous people, the Azeri language was presented as a basis for the creation of an all-Azeri identity. Thus, the myth of the existence of all-Azeri ethnic identity was created and actively used in Soviet foreign policy. But it was only short-lived. The autonomous republic of Azerbaijan in Iran was proclaimed on December 12, 1945 and lasted till 1949! Upon the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran in the second part of the 1940s and the end of the Stalinist era in 1953 the order to re-write the history of Azerbaijan was given, and from then on the new myths were concerned with the history of Northern Azerbaijan alone, that is, the territory of Azerbaijan SSR (Shnirelman, 2001a, 106-109).

A similar idea inevitably comes to the fore when reading about the development of Armenian historical mythology, in particular, about the myth of "Greater Armenia". And it is one of the many instances of what can be called the "greater X syndrome". As Shnirelman convincingly shows, not only Azeris and Armenians, but also all the other peoples "suffered" from the syndrome. In many cases, a greater X myth - the result of the syndrome - was exploited for foreign policy purposes as well. When the Armenian Democratic Republic was established in 1918, the authorities urgently needed a confirmation for the unity of Armenians, a myth that could help them to oppose Armenians to the Caucasian world. The corresponding historical myth was created, and the Armenian language was one of the proofs of Armenian singularity. Later, in the 1940s, hopes for restoring Armenian territories in Turkey caused the necessity to show that Armenians were an indigenous population of Eastern Asia Minor, and their demands for the land in Turkey were well vested. Although an appropriate version of Armenian past was readily presented, other factors did not permit the dream of Armenians to come true.

Though in both Armenian and Azeri cases, the attempts of Moscow, Baku and Yerevan failed to achieve the desired results, the experience with historical manipulations accumulated during those times was not lost. The idea that a group of people sharing the same ancestors, the same language, etc., should eventually unite within one and the same state, could be deeply rooted in actions originated at Smolenskaya and Arbatskaya squares (locations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Defense Ministry in Moscow) on some occasions[6].

5. Cycles of Myth Formation

As we saw above, the efforts and attempts by Caucasian peoples to reinterpret and rewrite the history of one's own ethnic group were embedded into a broad framework of the Soviet Union. Now we proceed to the main theme of the book, that is, the internal dynamics of myth formation proper.

It is very difficult to neatly summarize the rich and complex details, which fill the four hundred pages of the book. What follows is a summary of the relationships between the most important factors and processes described by Shnirelman. These dynamic relationships are schematically represented in **Figure 1.** As explained above, the whole process is set in a broader framework of the Soviet federal structure and nationalities policy and, sometimes, of Soviet foreign policy. The process is meaningful only in that framework. In the following part, we will discuss some of the major factors and actors in Figure 1 and their interaction.

(1) Ethnic groups (nationalities) and their rivals:

Five ethnic groups in Transcaucasia are discussed in the book: Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Abkhazians, and (South) Ossetians. Some geographically adjacent pairs of them had been in long rivalry or enmity. They had been competing with each other for privileged political status in the Soviet Union. The book focuses upon the conflicts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, between Georgians and Abkhazians, and between Georgians and South Ossetians.

(2) Political Leadership:

Each of the ethnic groups had its own political leadership. The leadership was obliged to pursue the goal of preserving or promoting the politico-economic status of its own ethnic group within the Soviet Union, while faithfully following Moscow. During the Soviet era, one of the most important means of achieving the goal was to establish the separate and lasting identity of the ethnic group and three criteria, territory (or homeland), statehood and language/religion were employed. Thus, the history of the ethnic groups, especially the origin or ethnogenesis, became an important political issue, and the past acquired great political importance. For this purpose, the political leadership sometimes went so far as to order scholars to write a new history (meaning *rewriting history*) of the ethnic group.

(3) Scholars:

The most important part of myth formation is usually assigned to scholars. And the greater part of the book is devoted to what kind of history or myth they have created and how. This is perhaps the most interesting and significant part of the book. Scholars, especially historians, archaeologists, historical linguists, ethnographers, were under pressure from both ethnic rivalry or hostility and from the political leadership of their own ethnic group, wishing to maintain or upgrade the political status of one's own group in the Soviet political structure. According to Shnirelman, the pressure continues to be strong even in the post-Soviet era. A scholar's academic and secular future often depends upon his or her efforts to establish the separate and continued identity of his or her own ethnic group.

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Figure 1. Process of Myth Formation
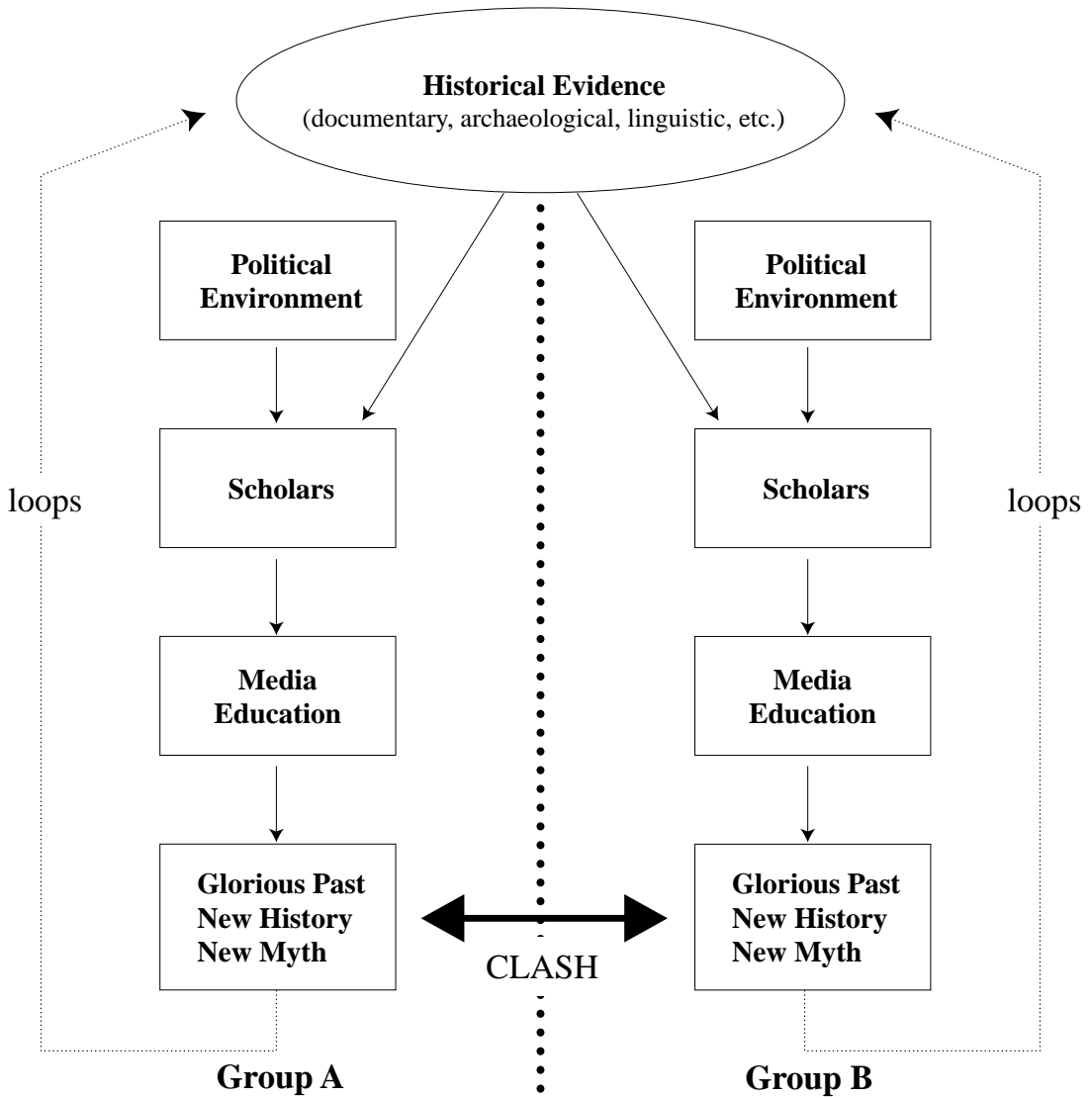
The efforts of myth production usually begin with the establishment of the homeland. In this process, earlier migratory theories are replaced by autochthonous theories. The scholars try their best to demonstrate "scientifically" that their own ethnic group was the earliest inhabitant (that is, autochthonous) of the territory in question. Thus, nations can be proud of the "2,750th anniversary of their capital" (Shnirelman, 2001a, 77) or that "their existence has continued since time immemorial." At the same time, the rival ethnic group, for example, Azeris in the case of Armenians and Armenians in the case of Azeris, is downgraded to the status of late comers or immigrants. Note here that scholars of the other party did exactly the same thing. Hence the clashes! And as a result, scholars had to go further and further back into the past in their efforts.

However, when the use of the first-settlers principle alone is not enough, the scholars try to demonstrate that their distant ancestors had been much more civilized and advanced than their rival neighbors (for example, that their ancestors were "the earliest civilized center of humankind"). This demonstration is based on the formation of urbanized settlements and ancient states (usually in the form of a kingdom) by their own ethnic group, and, sometimes, linguistic assimilation and/or religious conversion of neighboring groups. As Shnirelman frequently points out, important sets of evidence or sources (especially when they are contradictory) are completely ignored in these efforts. Moreover, for better or for worse, the scarcity of reliable evidence allows very wide latitude of interpretation and speculation. And, as pointed out above, these images of the past do not necessarily need to correspond to all the historical evidence available. Shnirelman often reminds us of this by inserting brief parenthetical comments with question marks or exclamation marks followed by his initial, V.Sh., such as "(though there is no evidence of any Scythians there, then, at all! V.Sh.)"(Shnirelman 2001a, 132). This is how the process of history revision results in the clash or war of historiography.

(4) Media and Education:

The new history of an ethnic group is usually disseminated by the mass media as well as being incorporated into school textbooks and inculcated in the young people. The result is a new myth in Connor's interpretation of the term cited above.

(5) Clash of Myths:

As mentioned before, it is often the case that both rival ethnic groups claimed that they (or at least their distant ancestors) were the earliest inhabitants of the disputed territory. Then the clash of claims based on myth or rewritten history of the past was inevitable. Each group tried its best to refute the other group's claim by going further and further back in history, say, into the 3rd millennium B.C!

In this process, two interesting interconnected phenomena can be found. One is a phenomenon which can be called "X-ization of Y." If we replace the variables X and Y by the names of the rival ethnic groups, we will obtain a typical consequence of history rewriting such as Georgianization of Abkhazia and Armenization of Azerbaijan (or Nagorno Karabakh). For example, if one wants to prove that the Azeris (or their ancestors called Caucasian Albanians[7]) were the first settlers of today's Nagorno Karabakh, either Armenians there should be treated as late comers or they should be regarded as Azeris who were linguistically assimilated into Armenian later, that is, as linguistically Armenianized Azeris. In contrast, Armenians claimed that they were the first settlers of Nagorno Karabakh, and accused the Azeri of the Azerbaijanization of the Karabakh Armenians. This is clearly the case of historical and symbolic ethnic cleansing.

The attempt at the historical and symbolic ethnic cleansing of the other party was frequently connected with the second phenomenon. It is a phenomenon, which we called "the greater X syndrome." Here again, X is a variable standing for an ethnic group. Each of the ethnic groups in rivalry believed that in some golden age of the past, they had had the greatest territory which had been far greater than that of today and usually spread into the territory of the rival. Greater Armenia and Greater Azerbaijan, and Greater Georgia and Greater Abkhazia were absolutely incompatible.

Such incompatible claims inevitably clash. And the clash of myths sets in motion another cycle of history rewriting by rival ethnic groups. The ethnic groups tried again to extend their origins "further and further into the past" (Shnirelman, 2001a, 51-59, and *passim*)

6. The Role of Language in Myth

According to Anthony Smith, an ethnic identity can be defined as a sense of belonging to a certain group of people - *ethnie* - who have in common a group name, a believed common ancestry, some collective historical memories, elements of shared culture such as language or religion, and an attachment to a specific territory (Smith, 1986, 22-31). Since a group can only be distinguished from other group by some criterion, these properties are assumed by groups who wish to establish their distinctness and identity. However, as Shnirelman shows, almost all of the ethnic group properties named by Smith could be changed. Only the fate of *language* as one of the markers for an ethnic group is different from the others, since language was thought to be a "primordial property" of an ethnic group.

The fact is, while ethnic identity was probably not the most important identity in the Soviet Union, it definitely was the only permanent, unchangeable, criterion of identity. In order to be identified as an authentic ethnic group, a group of people was supposed to maintain their original mother tongue. That was an approach cultivated in the USSR, and especially important in the Caucasus, which is often called "a fortress of languages," since more than fifty different languages are spoken there (Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, 1985, 126). That is why, except Russians, all ethnic groups had to struggle for the conservation and survival of their mother tongue. Those who failed to prove the uniqueness of their language usually faced a lower status. At the same time, all ethnic groups had to demonstrate that they had continued to use their own language from the very beginning of their existence. For this reason, ethnic groups (and especially their scholars) had to try their best to search in the distant past for the evidence of the continuity of their own language in a particular territory. If a specific language had continued to be used from very early times, the continued use of the language or the language itself becomes a primordial property, i.e. a property unchanged throughout history.

An ethnic group aspiring to a higher status in the Soviet Union had to be able to claim that it had continued to use their own language from centuries past, ideally from the time of their origin. In this way, the issue of ethnogenesis is inseparably linked with the issue of language. In other words, a successful combination of the language continuity postulate with the first-settlers principle is required. In sum, ethnic groups had to show both the current maintenance and the historical continued use of their mother tongue.

In continuation, let us examine the synchronic effort of an ethnic group to show the maintenance of their own language. As seen above, the claims for an ethnopolitical status were closely tied with the claim for territory or homeland (what we called X-ization). When this claim was combined with that of language, efforts were frequently made to show that people in the claimed territory used the same lan-

guage, the language of the ethnic group in question. And when this claim was pursued as a policy, we can talk about a linguistic enclosure policy, or more generally about an *ethnic enclosure* policy. The policy was adopted in many newly independent states after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The linguistic enclosure can be defined as a deliberate policy by ethnic elites to protect the integrity of their state by the imposition of their own language upon other ethnic groups living within the same territory[8]. Actually, the ethnic replacement of republican political elites in Transcaucasia (vast replacement of ethnic Russian and other non-titular individuals by titular nationalities) took place much earlier than the chronological end of the USSR, during the period which coincides with the fourth stage in Shnirelman's periodization[9]. However, the collapse of the USSR gave free hands to political leaders, who, since then, were able to conduct their desirable language policy without backward glances at the Center. The leaders of Transcaucasia tried to apply the ethnic enclosure approach, which they considered to be a very effective way of fighting ethnic opposition including separatism[10].

The same ethnic enclosure orientation can be found in the diachronic efforts of the search for the early origin and the continuity of one's own language. Needless to say, the result of the efforts of one ethnic group was almost always incompatible with that of the other group, as in the case of the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh.

The following two cases that Shnirelman presents, illustrates clearly the process of linguistic enclosure.
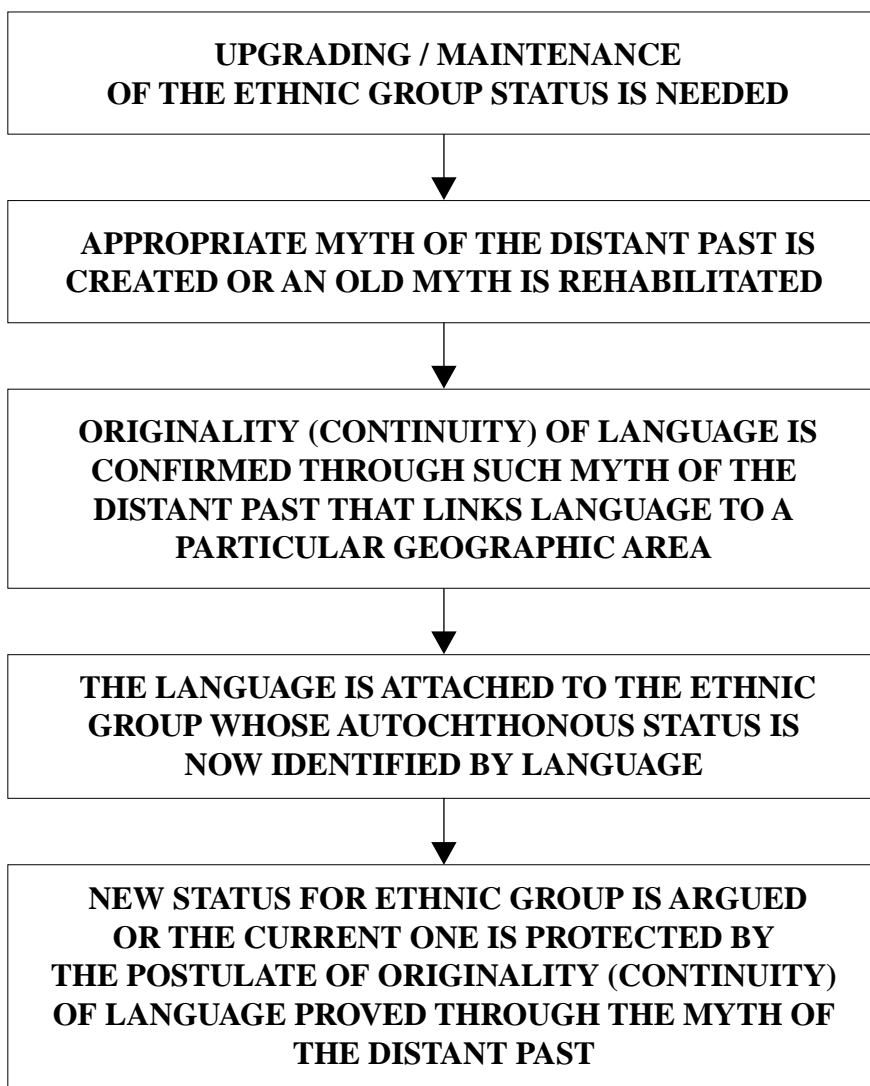
The first example is the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. It is well known that the Georgian language belongs to the Kartvelian group of the South Caucasian family of languages, while the Abkhazian language is part of the distinct North West Caucasian family. During most of the 20th century, Georgian elites had been considering the incorporation of Abkhazia into Georgia proper, which meant the abolition of the autonomous status of the Abkhazians within Georgia. Georgian scholars were actively involved in the creation of such myths of the distant past that could prove the "rightness" of the position of their ethno-political leadership. In order to *create* a new myth, even the local names for places, regions and other localities in Abkhazia were changed to sound Georgian and the Abkhazians were presented as "newcomers" to the area who were linguistically assimilated into the autochthonous Georgian population. Therefore, they do not have a distinct language, their tongue is "distorted Georgian" (Shnirelman, 2001a, 201-214 and 227-257)! In turn, the Abkhazian investigators of the past were eager to help their own ethnic leaders by confirming the uniqueness of the Abkhazian language and the continuity of its use by the Abkhazians *ab urbe condita* (Shnirelman, 2001a, 215-225). Nowadays, when unfortunately the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is far from over, both sides do not hesitate to open not yet dusty chests full of past myths.

Next, the South Ossetian problem is another case of a "linguistically-colored" clash of myths. Language was exploited in a similar way as in the Abkhazian case. Of course, the principal point of disagreement between Georgian and Ossetian ethnic elites is a *historical right* of the Ossetians to live on the territory of South Ossetia. The Georgian myth of the distant past categorically identifies Ossetians as the "newcomers" in the area. Such a conclusion is confirmed, from the Georgian point of view, by the evidence that many historical names in South Ossetia are based on the Georgian language. However, the first South Ossetian historian Zakharii Vaneev had tried to show that the area in question presents clear evidence of a strong cultural-linguistic continuity of the Alan-Ossetian people, - holders of the Iranian language[11] for more than 2,000 years (Shnirelman, 2001a, 353-379).

We can summarize Shnirelman's description of the role of language in the process of ethnic myth for-

mation as five consecutive steps. **Figure 2** represents the five steps in a graphic form. The figure is also a tentative analytical framework for further research on the role of language in ethnic myth formation. True, in Transcaucasia, there were exceptions from the scheme presented in Figure 2. One of the most significant exceptions is the case of Azerbaijan. The Azeris were unable to build their ethno-political identity on the basis of language continuity combined with the first-settlers principle[12]. Still, in the majority of other cases, not only in Transcaucasia but also in many other regions, ethnic elites were very successful in employing for the purposes of political struggle various myths that showed the continuity of original language-use by their people.

Figure 2 Struggle for Ethnic Group Status
Using Language and Myths of the Distant Past

UPGRADING / MAINTENANCE OF THE ETHNIC GROUP STATUS IS NEEDED

↓

APPROPRIATE MYTH OF THE DISTANT PAST IS CREATED OR AN OLD MYTH IS REHABILITATED

↓

ORIGINALITY (CONTINUITY) OF LANGUAGE IS CONFIRMED THROUGH SUCH MYTH OF THE DISTANT PAST THAT LINKS LANGUAGE TO A PARTICULAR GEOGRAPHIC AREA

↓

THE LANGUAGE IS ATTACHED TO THE ETHNIC GROUP WHOSE AUTOCHTHONOUS STATUS IS NOW IDENTIFIED BY LANGUAGE

↓

NEW STATUS FOR ETHNIC GROUP IS ARGUED OR THE CURRENT ONE IS PROTECTED BY THE POSTULATE OF ORIGINALITY (CONTINUITY) OF LANGUAGE PROVED THROUGH THE MYTH OF THE DISTANT PAST

7. Conclusion

A review of Shnirelman's voluminous work from various different angles has been attempted. It seems his main concerns are firstly to show the details of the contents of newly created myths, secondly, to show how these myths reflect the current political imperatives of the ethnic groups in question, and finally to show that the myths clash with each other, prompting another war of historiography, that is, the next cycle of historical reinterpretation and rewriting.

In this review, there has been no attempt to judge whether Shnirelman's descriptions of the myth-formation processes of ethnic groups are impartial and precise or otherwise. He can be criticized for not providing a theory or model that can explain most of the events he portrays. At the same time, the book is a treasure house of precious raw materials, which are very inspiring and thought-provoking and upon which researchers on ethnic issues can build their own theories. For example, we can see from the author's thorough account of how the efforts to confirm one's greater homeland (what we called the "greater X syndrome") resulted in the historical and symbolic ethnic cleansing of an opponent ethnic group through the appropriation of the past (often of the other groups). Even if one is not particularly interested in ethnic issues in Transcaucasia, the book is very rewarding, and valuable lessons can be learned.

Notes

(1) Though Shnirelman uses spellings such as Nagrony Karabagh and Nachjivan, which are closer to the native pronunciation, we will use conventional spellings.

(2) The identification of "all-Soviet nationalism" with Russian nationalism became especially clear during the Second World War. For example, in November 1941, Joseph Stalin gave a famous speech to the troops setting off for the front-line. The Soviet leader, an ethnic Georgian, was addressing the crowd, which had a number of different ethnic roots, but only Russian ancestors were named in that speech. The speech of Stalin illustrates the concept of "Soviet patriotism," first presented to the public by Mikhail Kalinin in 1940. Soviet patriotism in history which was supposed to mean appreciation of the roots of the early history, epic and traditional heroes of all Soviet peoples, in practice was realized through the obligatory formula to look at colonization, annexations and seizures by the Russian Empire as accepted and progressive events.

(3) Some 30,000 Talysh inhabit southeastern Azerbaijan, while nearly 100,000 inhabit the northwestern regions of Iran. During the Soviet times, the Talysh people were never given any type of autonomy.

(4) E.Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism*, Oxford, 1994, 199, cited in Szporluk (1998, 23).

(5) Fawcett (1992) argued that the policy of a united Azerbaijan was ultimately not supported by Moscow. However, in her profound research of the Azerbaijan crisis of 1946 she shows that the Soviet Azerbaijan's leadership was very active in that period in pursuing the idea of "the whole" of Azerbaijan being united. In addition, Fawcett portrays Moscow as using various methods in Northern Iran - such as the opening of a school that offered classes in Azeri and Russian in order to influence the situation. Those efforts were continuing until the failure of Soviet policy in Iran became clear, indicating the "USSR's earliest losses in [the Cold War]" (Fawcett, 1992, 107).

(6) For example, three years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the notion of "one Azerbaijan" was again in the agenda of Soviet historians. The Iranian Revolution provided another opportunity.

(7) In earlier times, northern parts of today's Azerbaijan were called Albania and the inhabitants Albanians though

they had nothing to do with today's Albanians

(8) Matsuo (1999) used the term "language homogenization" for describing this policy.

(9) For instance, Heydar Aliev had managed, during a relatively short period of time, to replace almost all ethnically non-Azeri party and Soviet bureaucrats in Azerbaijan by the representatives of the titular nationality (Shnirelman, 2001a, 87). And, in 1977, the new Georgian Constitution declared Georgian the state language to be used in this status everywhere in the republic including Abkhazia.

(10) The conflicts in Transcaucasia are obviously those that can be described as three-party "nested conflicts" (Matsuo 1999). However, contrary to the Moldovan case as well as to some other cases (see, for example, Landau, 1996; Laitin, 1998), where the bottom group used the Russian language as a shield against actions performed by the intermediate group, in the Caucasus the bottom groups preferred to stress their distinct identity through the distinctness of their own language.

(11) The Ossetian language belongs to the Iranian language family.

(12) However, the issue of the "Azeri language" was heavily employed during the period of existence of the Iranian Azerbaijani state. Sometimes, Azeris went so far as to argue that Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh were Azeris in origin but linguistically Armenianized!

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