

ETHICS, EMPATHY AND FEAR IN RESEARCH ON VIOLENT CONFLICT

ONLINE APPENDIX

This online appendix provides further information on the structure of 150 interviews with 142 research participants conducted in Abkhazia. The interviews were carried out as part of a larger research project on mobilization in civil war, with an exploratory trip in 2010 followed by long-term fieldwork in Abkhazia in 2011 and Georgia and Russia in 2013, where I conducted 30 elite interviews and one focus group with seven participants displaced from Abkhazia after the war.

Interviews in Abkhazia

The interviews were semi-structured. Following the informed consent procedure, they covered questions on the pre-war, war-time, and post-war aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and individual mobilization. The semi-structured plan guided the interview, but I invited departures from this structure and the conversation often covered themes beyond the prepared questions. The interviews typically took place in respondents' homes, offices, and public areas, including parks and cafes, and were conducted in Russian, a language that all respondents spoke fluently.

Stage 1

The first stage of the interview focused on participants' childhood and raised questions of inter-group relations in the family, neighborhood, and organizational settings, such as kin gatherings, community celebrations, and schools. Examples of questions included:

“What stories did you hear from your parents and grandparents when you were growing up?”

“Were you friends with Georgian neighbors and classmates?”

“What language did you learn at school?”

These questions helped me understand how everyday social relations affected the participants' collective views on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict from the early periods in their life histories.

Stage 2

The second stage of the interview focused on pre-war adulthood, particularly the university and employment experiences. I asked whom participants interacted with and how these interactions shaped their views on and participation in the pre-war conflict events. My questions included:

“Did you discuss the issues of Abkhazia's status with your Georgian friends and colleagues?”

“Did your friends and colleagues participate in the Georgian-Abkhaz clashes of 1989?”

“How did you get involved in the Abkhaz national movement?”

These questions helped position respondents in the context of collective action before the war.

Stage 3

The interview then focused on the first days of the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993. I asked participants to reconstruct the events of 14-18 August 1992 in as much detail as possible. The questions on the step by step individual mobilization trajectories included:

“Where were you on 14 August 1992?”

“How did you learn about the Georgian advance into Abkhazia?”

“Whom did you talk to when you learned about the advance and what did you do next?”

I then followed up with narrative questions on the participants' views on the advance, such as:

“Did you anticipate the war?”

“How did you understand the risks of the Georgian advance?”

“What motivated you to participate or not in the Abkhaz mobilization for war?”

These questions helped understand the sequences of individual actions at the war’s onset in the context of the shared views on the conflict and the social ties underlying war-time mobilization.

Stage 4

The remainder of the interview focused on the participants’ trajectories in the war and post-war mobilization. I asked how the fighting began, whether and how the participants’ roles changed during and after the war, and how they viewed the war’s outcomes. My questions included:

“In what capacity did you enter the Abkhaz force?”

“Did you retain your initial role in the fighting when the Abkhaz army was formed?”

“Why did you continue participating in the Abkhaz defence after the Georgian-Abkhaz war?”

“What did you do along the Georgian-Abkhaz border as part of the post-war Abkhaz defence?”

In follow up to the initial questions on the trajectories, I probed sensitive issues, where possible:

“Did your Georgian relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues participate in the fighting?”

“Was it possible to maintain neutrality in the course of the war?”

“Do you regret participating in the fighting?”

“Should Georgians displaced from Abkhazia as a result of the war return to their residence?”

These questions demonstrated the sheer complexity of roles that individuals oscillated between during the war and challenged the dominant Abkhaz narrative of the conflict by raising difficult dilemmas of participation in violence. This stage in the interview highlighted the differences in the emotional dynamics with and responses of individuals with the varied participation record.

Interviews in Georgia and Russia

My interviews in Georgia and Russia with experts, government officials, and persons displaced from Abkhazia took a different form. I asked questions on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict based on the expertise, position, and experience in the conflict. For example, historians helped clarify the pre-war interaction between the Georgian and Abkhaz national movements. Interviews with security officials focused on the distribution of armed actors in Abkhazia during and after the war. The focus group with displaced persons helped triangulate the Abkhaz perspectives on the conflict and those of Georgians who lived in Abkhazia before and during the war.

Examples of elite interview questions included:

“What was the role of the Georgian and Abkhaz activists in the inter-group clashes of 1989?”

“What was the relationship between the National Guard and the Mkhedrioni during the war?”

“Have there been shifts in the Abkhaz strategies of integrating the Gal/i district after the war?”

My discussion questions in the focus group with the displaced Georgian participants included:

“What were the Georgian-Abkhaz relations like in the areas where groups lived side by side?”

“Why did the war start and how did your community respond to the fighting in August 1992?”

“Have you been able to return to your residence in Abkhazia after the war? Why or why not?”

These interviews helped check the responses that I collected in Abkhazia and place them in the broader structural context of the Georgian-Abkhaz relations during and after the Soviet Union.