

## THE REFUGEE ACT OF 1980

Tanya arrived in the United States in 1994 from Belarus with refugee status, under The Refugee Act of 1980. The act was created in response to immigration needs of many people displaced from Vietnam and Cambodia due to years of conflict in that region. It adopted the United Nations definition of a "refugee," providing a more standardized understanding of this term. Importantly, the act increased the number of refugees that could be admitted to the United States each year, which rose from approximately 17,000 to 50,000 people per year. The law also allowed for the possibility to increase that number for a limited time, if necessary due to some sort of immigration emergency. At the time the law went into effect, many Americans were critical of it, thinking that the number of refugees entering would increase dramatically. But even after the new law, the U.S. still allowed a much smaller number of refugees than many other countries. Refugee or asylum status is given to people who have suffered persecution and violence in their place of origin. People seeking refuge as well as asylum fear that they will be persecuted for their race, religion, social group, or political thought. Refugee status corresponds to a form of protection. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to seek political asylum in another country. Tanya was escaping for religious persecution.

## GEORGIA AND ABKHAZIA

Georgia is a country located in southern eastern of Europe, bordering the Black Sea and sharing borders with Russia to the north and northeast, with Turkey and Armenia to the south and with Azerbaijan to the southeast. Its capital is Tbilisi. As of July 2015, the population of Georgia is 4,931,226. The ethnic majority corresponds to Georgians. The official language is Georgian. Russian is also spoken, as a result of the years it was part of the Soviet Union. Its geography is mountainous and its highest point is Mount Shkhara. Its climate is Mediterranean when it is close to the Black Sea, but it varies from cold to mountainous. Abkhazia is located in the Caucasus region, on the border between Asia and Europe. It is a mountainous place, with a subtropical climate in the lower parts. Its coasts belong to the Black Sea. It has been a de facto independent republic since 1992 and its capital is Sukhumi. Although Georgia and the majority of the international community recognize it as an autonomous republic within Georgia, only three countries recognize it as a nation (Russia, Nicaragua and Venezuela). Abkhazia covers an area of approximately 8,600 km<sup>2</sup> in western Georgia. The total population is about 243,564 people. The most numerous ethnic groups are the Apsuas and Georgians. The Apsuas are considered native Abkhazians. Demographics in the area changed and decreased dramatically in the 1990s after the war. The official languages are Abkhazian and Russian.

## CULTURE

Georgian culture is a mixture of elements of different cultures like Anatolia, European, Persian, Arab, Ottoman and the Far East. Each of them has influenced the identity of the country. According to visitors, their culture is hospitable, accommodating and tolerant. According to Georgian tradition, guests are a gift from God, which is why they are kind to their visitors. One of the main reasons for the country's cultural mix is its geographical location between Europe and Asia. This area was part of the historic Silk Road. Due to its mountainous areas, this region has been somewhat isolated and therefore somewhat less influenced or impacted by other cultures beyond its borders. Between the 11th and 12th centuries there was a rebirth of the Georgian state. The monks of the churches, monasteries, and academies proposed new ideas of a humanistic nature. Philosophy, history, poetry, law, and theology. There was also development in areas such as architecture, astronomy and geography. In the 19th century there was a boom in secular culture. Writers and artists were influenced by European trends, especially in the Georgian spiritual culture and in the country's folk music and dance.

## SPIRITUAL CULTURE

In Georgia and Abkhazia the majority of people practice Orthodox Christianity in different forms: The Georgian Orthodox, The Russian Orthodox, The Abkhazian Orthodox and The Armenian Orthodox. About 9.9% of Georgia's population are Muslims, most of whom are ethnic Azeris, Georgian Muslims of Ajara, and ethnic Chechen Kists. Approximately 4% of the population identifies with the Armenian Apostolic Church. A small percent about 1% of the population identifies as Roman Catholics. There are also smaller Christian denominations including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the Armenian Apostolic and New Apostolic Churches. Abkhazia also has small Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities. In Abkhazia there is a small religious community that has been growing in number, called Abkhaz Native Religion. It should be noted that while the region was under the authorities of the Soviet Union, from its beginnings until its fall (1917-1991), there were periods of brutal repression and persecution of the population that practiced Christianity in its different forms. Many of the refugees fled for this reason. Tanya's family were Pentecostal Christians and were also part of the large number of displaced people. Georgia's constitution allows freedom of worship and the community generally does not interfere with traditional religious groups, but cases of discrimination against non-traditional religious minorities have been reported.

## RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Between 1928-1939 the Soviet Union was an atheistic state, where religion was persecuted. From 1945 until its dissolution it was a secular state. However the Soviet authorities suppressed and persecuted various forms of Christianity. Soviet Marxist-Leninist policy advocated control, suppression, and ultimately elimination of religion, officially declaring that religious beliefs were superstitious and backward, promulgating scientific atheism. From the Revolution in 1917 to Lenin's death in 1924, some 25,000 Orthodox ecclesiastics were jailed and 16,000 executed. Buddhist temples, synagogues, mosques and churches were destroyed. The total number of Christians killed is estimated at 20 million. In 1937 and 1938, religious persecution was estimated at between 100,000 executions and 200,000 deported or retaliated. In 1943, Stalin stopped the persecution due to the war against Hitler. In the post-World War II period, the majority of Baptist, Pentecostal, and Adventist believers were sent to mental hospitals, in addition to being prosecuted and imprisoned. Among the many leaders and believers who were victims of the communist regime, Vladimir Shelkov of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement and Ivan Voronaev, one of the Pentecostal leaders, stand out. Protestant religious groups were estimated to have reached 5 million followers in the 1980s. Before their collapse in late 1991, official figures on religion in the Soviet Union were not available.

## APRIL 9 TRAGEDY, 1989

In 1989 the anti-Soviet movement was gaining strength in The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Demonstrations and strikes were organized, mainly in the capital Tbilisi. Relations between the Soviet government and Georgian nationalists further deteriorated when thousands of Abkhazians called for Georgia's secession at the Lijni Assembly in March of that year. The anti-Soviet movement organized demonstrations arguing that the government was using Abkhaz separatism against the pro-independence movement. The protests peaked on April 4, when large numbers of Georgians demonstrated outside the government palace. Subsequently, the Soviet authorities were unable to control the situation. Consequently, on the night of April 8, troops were mobilized in order to dissolve the demonstrations by any necessary means. Due to the violent actions of Soviet soldiers, 21 people, mainly women, were killed and nearly 4,000 wounded during the protests. After the unfortunate events, a general strike and 10 days of mourning took place in Tbilisi and the rest of Georgia. Consequently, the Georgian Soviet government resigned. The Soviet authority, Mikhail Gorbachev declined any responsibility, transferring it to the Army. The tragedy radicalized the Georgian opposition against the Soviets, as a result independence of the Soviet Union was declared in 1991. April 9 had an impact throughout the Soviet Union, inspiring others to fight against the regime.

## ABKHAZ-GEORGIAN CONFLICT

The Abkhazia War in 1992-1993 was fought mainly between the Georgian government forces, the Abkhazian separatist forces, the Russian armed forces, and militants from the North Caucasus. The war has an ethnic secessionist character. Shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia declared independence in April 1991. For its part, Abkhazia proclaimed its independence in July 1992. In order to control the insurgents, Georgia bombs the Abkhazian Parliament and dissolves it in August 1992. The Abkhaz crisis thus assumes the form of an armed conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians. In late September 1993, the separatists, with Russian backing, resisted the offensive, recovering and controlling Sukhumi. During the conflict, the separatist forces of Abkhazia carried out an ethnic cleansing, expelling more than 250,000 people from the Georgian ethnic group, and more than 15,000 died. Primarily Abkhazian refugees and Georgians who followed the Georgian army. It should be noted that both Georgian and Abkhazian troops attacked civilian populations, looting private property. On both sides, the forces were made up of national and foreign volunteers, who in many cases had little preparation and no discipline, which resulted in abusive practices, especially in rural areas. The conflict was one of the bloodiest in the post-Soviet era and is still unresolved. There have been several attempts by all parties to reach an agreement, but none of them has been able to come close to a full solution.

## GEORGIA AND U.S

Diplomatic relations between Georgia and the United States started on March 24, 1992. According to government data, Georgia has made an effort to combat corruption, trying to modernize and prepare its government institutions, as well as diplomatic ones. The United States recognizes the sovereignty of the country and the borders that it limits with its neighboring countries. On the other hand, the American government does not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states of Georgia. Both countries maintain stable diplomatic relations, where Georgia represents a strategic ally within the region. Financial support from the United States has been essential since the beginning of diplomatic relations. The US government recognizes Georgia as a strategic ally in the Caucasus region, especially in relation to energy resources.