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# Conflict In The Caucasus : The Long History Of Russian Imperialism

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The latest Russian invasion of Georgia--following the examples provided by tsars Paul I and his successor Alexander I (in 1801) and Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin (in 1921, three years after Georgia first gained modern independence)--has fully revealed the character of post-Soviet neo-imperialism under Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The Kremlin's master, his puppet president Dmitry Medvedev, and their supporters are obviously committed to reversing the dissolution of the Soviet empire after 1991, with an ambition and ferocity previously absent among the successors to the Communist dictators. But no one can really have been surprised by the assault on Georgia. It was clearly on the Russian agenda beginning early in 2004, when American-educated and Western-oriented attorney Mikheil Saakashvili was elected Georgia's president after the peaceful "Rose Revolution." Military expert Ralph Peters, in a briefing at the American Enterprise Institute on August 13, argued persuasively that the speed of Russia's latest rape of Georgia demonstrated that the aggressor's armed forces were ready and waiting for Putin's signal to act.

Georgia's transition toward democracy coincided with the similar Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. All of them piqued the anger of Putin, who wanted less rather than more self-determination in the former Soviet states.

But Georgia and Ukraine had taken further measures to consolidate their Western alignment, by applying for membership in the NATO alliance. Some commentators imply that Russian interference in Georgia was spurred by Western recognition of the independence of Kosovo in February 2008. But a much more serious contributing fact was NATO's decision at the Bucharest conference in April, impelled by Germany and France under Russian influence, to reject Georgian and Ukrainian membership in the defense organization.

President George W. Bush had lobbied for the eastward extension of NATO. Georgia had joined the Partnership for Peace--considered by most countries a step toward NATO membership--in 1992, and applied for full accession in 2002, but Ukraine had delayed its application until early this year. Exclusion of the two former Soviet possessions was a clear signal to Putin that Moscow could begin a brutal reassertion of domination over them.

In pursuing this aim, Putin, trained as an officer of the Soviet secret police, carried out a series of actions, each of which should have been enough to warn the world of his intentions. Secessionist movements had been subsidized by the Russians since the early 1990s in Abkhazia, where Russian "peacekeepers" were stationed in 1993, and in South Ossetia, where some residents took Russian rather than Georgian citizenship, even though Ossetians are not Slavs, but a Christian people of Iranian origin.

Both of these territories have belonged to Georgia for millennia. But they had been granted fake "autonomy" under Soviet rule, to fragment the Georgian

majority, which is also non-Slav. The Abkhazians are related to the Georgians, and include Muslims as well as Christians.

The years since the Rose Revolution, and especially since the rejection of Georgian and Ukrainian admission to NATO, have seen a rising Russian policy of provocation against Georgia, the weaker of the two aspirants to Western defense links. In 2006, mysterious explosions cut off the Russian supply of natural gas to Georgia. Mainly rhetorical tensions continued until April 2008, when Russian harassment increased.

Russia announced that it would recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as separate entities from Georgia, integrating Abkhazia's Black Sea transport facilities into the Russian air and maritime infrastructure, and proposing construction of a new gas pipeline in the coastal region. The same month, Russia's Abkhazian agents shot down a Georgian air force drone. In July, respected Russian military journalist Pavel Felgenhauer warned that a Russian-provoked war would break out in Georgia in August. His prediction was ignored in the West.

As for Saakashvili's responsibility in the situation, the Georgian president had been pressed to a point where a failure to act to protect his country's territorial integrity would have indicated surrender to Moscow without a fight.

Once real war exploded, the Russians began a new round of provocative public relations actions. They bussed South Ossetian "refugees" from place to place, describing them as victims of Georgian "genocide." Moscow declares that it has the right to intervene anywhere the "dignity" of its co-ethnics, or their allies, may be threatened--within or outside its borders, and especially in the so-called "near abroad" of former Soviet territories. The Russians have also, outrageously, called for the removal, and possible trial, of Saakashvili as an "enemy."

To anybody who has observed the sequence of ethnic wars in the former Communist world since 1990, the playbook is familiar. Like Putin, Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic paraded Serbian "victims" around the former Yugoslavia, and asserted the right to commit mass murder in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo allegedly to protect his compatriots. The establishment of mafia enclaves like the "Republika Srpska," occupying half of Bosnia, and a similar effort now underway north of Mitrovica in Kosovo, paralleled the nurturing of a mafia parastate in "Transnistria" on the border of Moldova, as well as Putin's operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

But while the effects are the same, Putin has not imitated Milosevic; rather, he has followed a pattern set even before the Soviet Union began disintegrating, in 1988, when Armenia, allied with Russia, recovered a section out of its neighbor, Azerbaijan that had been detached by Stalin. Armenia and Azerbaijan, which border Georgia to the southwest, remain at war today.

Meanwhile, radical Islamist agitation continues in Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan, to Georgia's north. Iran is not far away; Persia ruled Georgia before the Russian conquest in the 19th century, and Tehran still sees Georgia as within its potential sphere of influence. Russia has launched its newest adventure in the most dangerous part of the European-Asian frontier.

The horror unfolding in Georgia could prove to be the worst such gambit since the ill-fated Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and may become the first major clash in a new cold war. And even if Georgia is vanquished, wise observers like AEI's Leon Aron warn that the real target is Ukraine. Putin might attempt to reassert Russian control over Crimea, which came under Ukrainian authority after communism ended; or he might try to slice off part

of Eastern Ukraine as yet another ethnic enclave susceptible to Russian usurpation. But Ukraine is big, and its native population is likely unafraid to fight. When Ukraine informed Moscow that the Russian Black Sea fleet, which was stationed in Crimea, could not be used against the Georgians, the Russian ships lifted anchor.

Some critics say President Bush was slow to reply to Russian aggression against Georgia, which had sent troops to fight alongside American forces in Iraq. As the days went by, however, the U.S. response improved, and U.S. military and humanitarian supplies have been flown to the embattled Georgians.

Saakashvili and his people have other friends, whose attitude toward Russian power is hardly accommodating. Along with Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, the Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, and the leaders of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania flew to Tbilisi to demonstrate their backing for Putin's victims. They know only too well the history of their region.

Thus, with the tsar's conquest of Georgia more than 200 years ago, the ancient Georgian Christian monarchy--which had survived Iranian rule--was abolished. A few years later, the Georgian Orthodox Church, which had enjoyed religious autonomy since the 4th century, was forcibly absorbed into Russian Orthodoxy.

Under the tsars, Georgia was a hotbed of nationalist discontent. By the beginning of Russia's radical revolutionary period, it had come under the political dominance of the moderate Socialists, or Mensheviks; Lenin's invasion in 1921 quashed the only post-tsarist Menshevik regime. But Georgia also produced Bolsheviks, including Joseph Stalin, who was educated in a Georgian Orthodox seminary that had become a center for nationalist and revolutionary indoctrination.

Stalin, who never mastered the Russian language, nonetheless became a Slav chauvinist, and although his minions in power included his fellow-Georgian, the feral police boss Lavrenti Beria, he was brutal to most of his ethnic peers. The dark year 1937, when the murder machine was operating at full throttle, saw the purge and execution of Titsian Tabidze, a gifted and renowned modernist poet who had been a close friend of Boris Pasternak. Tabidze's associate Paolo Yashvili committed suicide in protest, in the office of the Georgian Writers' Union. These authors remain beloved heroes and martyrs of the Georgian people.

As for the South Ossetians, whose "leaders" have provided cover for subversion of Georgian authority, they have their own baleful history. Under the tsars, the Ossetians were known as prison guards and other mercenaries for the Russian overlords. Stalin's parents have long been described as Georgianized Ossetians, and in one of his most memorable verses, the purged and murdered poet Osip Mandelstam, Russia's greatest writer after Pushkin, wrote of Stalin, Every killing is sweet as berry jam / For the proud, broad-chested Ossetian. The poem cost Mandelstam his life.

It is still possible to prevent more bloodshed in Georgia. But time is short in dealing with Putin, the proud, physically-fit secret police veteran, as he advances along the terrible path of his war-mongering predecessors.

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