
Ethnic tensions : War in the Caucasus is Stalin's legacy

By Shaun Walker
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Arbitrary boundaries and forced repatriation are two of the causes behind the constant conflicts in the former Soviet Union.

The Georgians are bombing South Ossetia; the Russians have come through the Roki tunnel to take Tskhinvali; a second front has been launched in the Kodori Gorge; the Russians have occupied Gori, Poti and Senaki. It's been a week where names and places that previously didn't register a blip on the Western consciousness have suddenly become headline news. Even most of the journalists covering the conflict, shipped in from big bureaux across the world, had never heard of Tskhinvali in the morning when they flew in. By evening they were pontificating about the significance of its fall to the Russians on live television.

The most intense stage of conflict is over now in South Ossetia, but hopes for a negotiated settlement remain very slim indeed. The real bad news, though, is that South Ossetia is not alone as a potential hot spot in the former Soviet Union. There are many spots that you may never have heard of, dotted all around the territory that was once part of the Red Empire.

As well as South Ossetia, there is Georgia's other breakaway state of Abkhazia. Tiny South Ossetia is inconceivable as a "real country", and could only be part of either Russia or Georgia, but Abkhazia might have a better shot of making it. It has a coastline, which fuels the tourist industry that is beginning to revive, and means that trade with countries other than Russia is possible.

Hidden in the lush forest above the coast at Gagra in Abkhazia is a lime-green mansion; one of several dachas built for Joseph Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, along the Abkhaz coastline. He'd come for weeks in the summer, relaxing on the balcony or playing a game of pool with other leading Bolsheviks. It may have been here that Stalin made many of the decisions that scattered and divided nations, and led to many of the conflicts that have flared up since the Soviet Union collapsed. National and ethnic identi-

ties were shifted, encouraged or suppressed during different periods. Whole nations were deported to Siberia or the Kazakh steppe, scattered irrevocably like human dust. Borders between the different entities of the union were changed at will, often with the express intention of fomenting ethnic unrest.

In Abkhazia itself, huge numbers of Georgian settlers were moved in; the Abkhaz language was suppressed and the Georgian language was enforced in schools and universities. In fact, many ethnic Abkhaz talk about the Georgian rule over their territory in the same terms that the Georgians themselves talk about Soviet oppression.

While Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin undoubtedly ruthlessly exploit the tensions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is a foolish mistake to think they created them. Ossetians and Abkhaz remember all too well the aggressive and unpleasant Georgian nationalism during the early 1990s, and have no desire to be part of a Georgian state. Meanwhile, after the wars in both regions at that time, many ethnic Georgians still live as refugees in grim conditions in Tbilisi and other Georgian cities.

The Abkhaz say that all the West's posturing over "territorial integrity" is meaningless - why on earth should arbitrary lines drawn up by Stalin be the

basis for statehood in the 21st century? Now that Saakashvili has been humiliated over the South Ossetian conflict, the Abkhaz are more buoyant than ever, and it's hard to see the territory ever becoming part of Georgia again. The threat of conflict will always loom, though, and when the Georgians rebuild their army and country, we can expect to see renewed conflict.

Over the other side of the Caucasus Mountains, things are just as volatile. We all know about Chechnya, and the bloody wars that Russia has fought to bring the region under its control. For now, under the iron-fisted rule of former rebel Ramzan Kadyrov, the situation is relatively quiet, and ironically the odious Kadyrov has achieved far more independence from Moscow than his rebel predecessors could have dreamed of. He has built a Chechnya that for all intents and purposes is independent from Moscow, and he's done it using Moscow's money.

Not too far from Chechnya is Prigorodny District, a disputed bit of land between Ingushetia and North Ossetia. Stalin had the entire Ingush population, along with the Chechens, deported to Kazakhstan during the Second World War. By the time they were allowed to return in the 1950s, their houses had been taken over by ethnic Ossetians. Another small, nasty war in the early 1990s failed to solve the problem, and there are still disgruntled Ingush refugees who want to return; some of them were involved in the Beslan school siege in North Ossetia.

One of the Kremlin's fears about Georgian actions in South Ossetia was a renewed stream of Ossetian refugees crossing the Caucasus Mountains and flooding into Prigorodny, setting off more tensions with the Ingush and repercussions across the North Caucasus. That's not to say that Russia's response was born purely from security concerns, but if Britain can feel justified to intervene for strategic reasons in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's hardly surprising that the Russians feel they can use force on their own doorstep to prevent instability across their southern region.

As well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there are two other "breakaway states" in the former Soviet Union. There's Nagorno-Karabakh, where a war in the early 1990s killed 30,000. The territory is ethnically majority Armenian, was part of Azerbaijan in the Soviet period, but is now controlled by Armenian separatists. A shaky status quo sees much of the territory still in ruins, no diplomatic relations between the two countries, and a large chunk of Azerbaijan "proper" occupied by Armenia. Malnourished conscripts point rifles at each other from muddy trenches along the last genuine front line in Europe.

Then there's Transdniestria, a sliver of land controlled by Moscow-loyal separatists but officially part of Moldova. It's run by Igor Smirnov, who might make the Guinness World Records for having the bushiest eyebrows in the world. His land is a potential conflict zone right on the EU's border.

The list goes on and on. In the Fergana Valley, a three-country zone in Central Asia where impoverished Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks live, Islamic extremism is on the rise and the potential for ethnic conflict growing all the time. All the way across the other side of the former Soviet Union, the sizeable Russian minority in the Baltic states feels oppressed and excluded from their countries' drive towards the EU and linguistic nationalism.

One of Vladimir Putin's most-quoted phrases is that the "collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 21st century". This was widely interpreted as being part of the ex-KGB agent's hankering for the return of the Soviet past. But Putin spoke the words while talking about the vicious wars that raged in its aftermath and the wars that are likely to come in the future. The week's events in South Ossetia show how quickly simmering

tensions can erupt into vicious conflict. Look out for more violence in places you've never heard of, coming soon
