

---

# Many Ethnic Conflicts Erupted As Soviet Union Collapsed

By Jonathan S. Landay  
McClatchy Washington Bureau - 8/8/2008

---

Until heavy fighting erupted Friday, the feud between Georgia and its rebel enclave of South Ossetia was one of the "frozen conflicts," or stalemated territorial contests between ethnic groups ignited by the former Soviet Union's collapse.

## GEORGIA-SOUTH OSSETIA

South Ossetia is a mountainous enclave of about 70,000 people bordering Russia. One-third of its population is Georgian. Ossetians, who speak a language related to Farsi, seek union with North Ossetia, which is inside the Russian Federation.

Georgia, whose 4.4 million people speak Georgian and Russian, voted for independence after the former Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

Ethnic clashes erupted in 1989 as the Soviet Union headed toward breakup, prompting the deployment of Soviet troops. Sporadic unrest continued after Ossetian leaders declared their intention to secede.

The bloodshed abated after Russia, Georgia and Ossetian leaders agreed to form a tripartite peacekeeping force in 1992. But talks failed to resolve the standoff, and tensions flared anew after the 2004 election of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, who declared his intention to reclaim the enclave.

South Ossetia, which receives political and economic support from Russia, voted to secede in 2006, but the referendum wasn't internationally recognized. The dispute became enmeshed in the larger tensions between the United States and Russia over the expansion of NATO, which Georgia is seeking to join with American backing.

## GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA

Georgia also is grappling with breakaway Abkhazia, a region of about 250,000 people on the Black Sea whose separatist leaders receive strong backing from Moscow.

Ethnic Georgians were a majority of the population there when the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia became independent. Ethnic Abkhaz began agitating for independence and fighting erupted, prompting Georgia to send in troops.

Georgia charges that Moscow provided the assistance that allowed Abkhaz rebels to drive out the Georgian troops in 1993. Thousands of ethnic Georgian civilians also fled.

U.N. military observers and Russian peacekeeping troops, whom Georgia accuses of shielding the separatists, have kept a fragile peace. Negotiations have made no progress.

Abkhazia formally declared independence in 1999, but hasn't been internationally recognized. It's under an international economic embargo, but receives goods from Russia via rail. Moscow also has given Russian passports to most Abkhaz.

#### MOLDOVA-TRANS-DNEISTER

Trans-Dneister, most of whose population speaks Russian and Ukrainian, declared independence in 1990 from Moldova, which is dominated by Romanian speakers. The declaration has never been recognized internationally.

Hundreds of people died in fierce fighting that erupted after Moldova became independent, prompting Russia to send troops. The narrow strip of territory between the Dneister River and Ukraine has since gained notoriety as a center of international organized crime.

Trans-Dneister's leaders held a referendum in 2006 that reaffirmed the independence declaration and set a goal of union with Russia. Negotiations on ending the dispute have made no progress.

NATO has demanded that Russia withdraw its troops from Trans-Dneister. But Moscow continues to maintain a base there, ostensibly to protect a stockpile of weapons whose removal the separatist leadership has blocked.

#### NAGORNO-KARABAGH

Nagorno-Karabagh is a region in Azerbaijan, an overwhelmingly Muslim former Soviet republic. The enclave's population is mainly ethnic Christian Armenian.

Ethnic clashes erupted in 1988, prompting ethnic Azeris to flee the enclave and neighboring Armenia, and ethnic Armenians to flee Azerbaijan. The number of displaced people is estimated at about 1 million.

Heavy combat erupted after the territory declared independence in 1991 and its intention to unite with Armenia.

Aided by Armenia, ethnic Armenian forces defeated Azerbaijani forces, then pushed beyond Nagorno-Karabagh's limits, creating a buffer zone that they still control.

Up to 30,000 people are thought to have died before Russia brokered a 1994 cease-fire. Internationally mediated talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia have failed to resolve the dispute.

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/homepage/story/46970.html>

---