
Why Does South Ossetia Want Independence?

By Paul Sonne
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South Ossetians say they deserve independence. Georgians say South Ossetia is part of their country.

Both sides have a convincing argument, thanks to the complicated history of the Caucasus.

Regardless of who started the fighting, Soviet history is partly to blame for the tanks that rolled into South Ossetia this month.

"Without understanding Soviet history, you miss the whole point of what has been going on," said Ronald Grigor Suny, a professor of history and political science at the University of Michigan. "Basically what the structure did was solidify and institutionalize ethnic differences."

Though predominantly Russian, the Soviet Union was home to about 100 ethnic groups.

Vladimir Lenin and his comrade Josef Stalin spent years trying to figure out how to keep them all under control.

The larger groups like the Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Armenians had their own "union" republics, 15 in total, which made up the Soviet federation.

The smaller groups like the Chechens, Ossetians, Tatars and Bashkirs had special homelands within those republics, known as "autonomous" regions or districts. A bit like Native American reservations, these districts enjoyed special privileges and status.

South Ossetia was one such district, located inside the republic of Georgia. So was Chechnya, located inside Russia.

Suny compared the government structure to a Russian nesting doll: the autonomous districts are the innermost doll, located inside the 15 union republics, inside the U.S.S.R.

"It's a situation where you have conflict built into the very structure that was created by the Soviet Union," he said. "You had local Ossetian claims, regional Georgian claims, and then big Soviet claims."

The Soviet Union tried to draw these minorities into the larger Soviet culture, but also encouraged ethnic consciousness.

During the early Soviet period, the Kremlin created autonomous regions, chose local ethnic leaders for Communist Party posts and promoted indigenous languages, even creating alphabets for some languages that didn't have them.

The idea was to promote minorities in a way that would give them a stake in the Soviet enterprise in other words, convince them not to revolt.

"The formation of autonomous republics was partly genuine concern, involving ethnographers, for ethnicities," said Stephen Kotkin, a professor of Russian history at Princeton University, but it was also "partly mischief, imperial divide and rule."

The system worked under tight Kremlin control. But then the Soviet empire began to unravel in the late 1980s.

The Georgians launched a nationalist movement. To the surprise of some Georgians, South Ossetia and Abkhazia having experienced some level of self-rule as autonomous regions launched nationalist movements of their own.

The Georgian nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia sent troops to quell the unrest, and war broke out. The Russians became what Suny calls "forced separators" of the two sides.

"When the Union dissolved ... these two Trashcanistans bandit statelets wanted out of Georgia," Kotkin said. "The short, nasty wars of 1990 to 1992 resulted in stalemate: de facto, but unrecognized independence."

The two regions have been de facto independent ever since.

In light of the history, both Georgians and South Ossetians would seem to have a legitimate claim to the disputed territory. The conflicting claims simply have different justifications.

Georgia, Suny said, has a legitimate claim to the land on the grounds of territorial integrity. South Ossetia was located within the boundaries of Georgia, and by international law, boundaries cannot be changed unless both sides agree.

Kosovo was an exception.

South Ossetia, he said, also has a justifiable claim but on the grounds of national self-determination: the idea that any nationality that sees itself as a nation should have the right to rule itself.

But the fact that both sides have justified claims to the land hardly stopped war from breaking out this month, leaving numerous innocent people dead. In fact, that may have made things worse.
