

Abkhazia and South Ossetia: heart of conflict, key to solution

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On the second full day of the Georgia-Russia war of 8-12 August 2008, Russian patrol-boats operating off the [Black Sea](#) [1] shore of Abkhazia sank four Georgian vessels apparently intent on landing in the territory. The identity of these vessels is not yet clear, but it is interesting to note that a published list of military equipment in the possession of the Georgian government - equipment largely supplied over many years by Tbilisi's western friends - includes a ship called the *General Mazniashvili*.

Why interesting? Because General Mazniashvili (aka Mazniev) is best known for his role in spreading "fire and sword" through Abkhazia and South Ossetia on behalf of Georgia's Menshevik government of 1918-21. The naming of the ship is a revealing indicator of current official Georgian sentiment about a figure central to the pitiless effort ninety years ago to establish control over these two areas. It is also a reminder to Abkhazians and South Ossetians that their hard-won freedom from Georgian rule in the brutal wars of the early 1990s is part of a longer history of defence of their integrity that deserves the world's attention, understanding and respect.

These peoples, and not just the Georgians - or Russians, or Americans, or anyone else involved in the latest war in the region - have their own history, many of whose artefacts have been deliberately pulverised in this generation (see Thomas de Waal, "[Abkhazia's archive: fire of war, ashes of history](#) [1]" [20 October 2006]). The lesson of the short war of August 2008 is that their Abkhazian and South Ossetian voices must be heard and their own choices must be included in any decisions about their future if the cycle of conflict - of which 1918-21 and 1991-93 are but two episodes - is going to be broken rather than repeated.

A political boomerang

The torrent of media commentary on the Georgia-Russia war has been characterised by near-obsessive geopolitical calculation, which - as so often where Georgia and the region is concerned - tends by default to view Georgia's "lost" territories (if they are viewed at all) as nothing more than inconsiderate and irritating pawns on a global chessboard. For this reason - but mainly because [Abkhazia](#) [2] and South Ossetia matter in themselves and are central to any resolution of the issues underlying the August 2008 war - it is useful to consider the arguments for taking them and their claims seriously.

A striking feature of the Georgian political landscape even in these desperate days of [Mikheil Saakashvili's](#) [3] humiliation is that there is very little recognition in the country of how deep are

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the scars inflicted by Georgia's invasions of South Ossetia (1990-92) and Abkhazia (1992-93). It is only when Georgia can at an official level come to take responsibility for its own role in this period [4] that progress in resolving [5] these now so-called "frozen conflicts" can be made.

One vital ingredient of this rethinking is to recognise the longstanding residency-claims of South Ossetians [6] and Abkhazians to their respective territories. During the heady days of nationalism that exploded in Tbilisi in 1989, the man who was to become the first post-Soviet [7] president of Georgia - Zviad Gamsakhurdia - even charged that the Ossetians only appeared in Georgia on the coat-tails of the Red Army's invasion in 1921.

It was and is a myth" (see "The North-west Caucasus and Great Britain [8]", Autumn 1992). The late specialist on Iranian languages, Ilya Gershevitch, once told me that in his view the language of the South Ossetians differs so radically from that spoken in North Ossetia that the split must have occurred in pre-Christian times. Moreover, Queen Tamar (ruled 1184-1213), the sovereign under whom Georgia attained its "golden age", was at least half-Ossetian and also took one husband who was Ossetian. But such myths - which are also circulated to deny that the Abkhazians [9] are the indigenous population of Abkhazia - can become truly dangerous in times of tension.

Amid Georgia's late-Soviet disintegration, intellectuals and nascent civil society in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia [10] realised the perils that the chauvinistic rhetoric aimed against them from Tbilisi posed. They formed national forums (*Adamon Nykhas* in South Ossetia, *Aydgylara* in Abkhazia) to defend their respective collective and political interests, and created links between the regions [11] that continue to this day.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia - believing his own myths, a self-harming flaw shared by his successor-but-one Mikheil Saakashvili - thought it would be an easy matter to dislodge the South Ossetians from the territory (which Georgians decided to rename *Samachablo*). The result [12] was war that started in 1990, escalated in 1991, and expired in spring 1992. By this latter date Gamsakhurdia had been overthrown, and a military junta had assumed control in Tbilisi; in March 1992 this junta invited Eduard Shevardnadze - the former boss of Georgia's Soviet-era Communist Party, and later Soviet foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev - to lead it.

Gamsakhurdia and his armed supporters resisted the new authorities from his base in the west Georgian province of Mingrelia [13]. Shevardnadze chose to compromise with the South Ossetians, and the two sides (with the involvement of the then Russian president, Boris Yeltsin) signed the Dagomys accords. The provisions of the agreement included a tripartite (Georgian, Ossetian, Russian) peacekeeping force to monitor the ceasefire.

As a result, South Ossetia [13] after 1992 - typified by its quiet capital Tskhinval (Tskhinvali) - became a neglected backwater with little to offer its citizens other than to travel by the Roki tunnel into the Russia Federation's republic of North Ossetia in search of work. This situation continued through the decade of Eduard Shevardnadze's rule in Georgia; it began to change after Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in 2004, with a pledge to restore South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgian control (and within two years [14]) high on his nationalistic agenda.

The effects of his active - or meddling - stance were soon felt. A local market on the border with the disputed territory, where the two sides had no problems cooperating for purposes of trade, was closed down on the grounds that it was part of the "black economy". Then a pliable Ossetian was found to head a

Also on Abkhazia in

pro-Georgian "government" for South Ossetia, based in villages on the Georgian side of the border.

None of this "worked" even in its own terms. A singular aspect of the August 2008 war is that it confounds the long-held expectation the South Ossetian "problem" would prove easier for Tbilisi to manage and solve than that of Abkhazia - the larger, more prosperous and better defended [14] of the two disputed regions. Instead, Saakashvili's reclamation project has come to grief in South Ossetia, which is now more distant from Tbilisi's rule than ever (see Donald Rayfield, "The Georgia-Russia conflict: lost territory, found nation [14]", 13 August 2008).

The folly of war

It all looked different to Georgia's latest myth-maker as recently as January 2008, when Mikheil Saakashvili was re-elected president. He promised again the two territories would be recovered, during his second term. The months of tension that followed climaxed in the ferocious assault led by Grad-missiles that was launched on an unsuspecting Tskhinval [15] on the night of 7-8 August 2008.

Saakashvili continues to claim that Georgian actions were a response to the introduction of Russian tanks, though he makes no mention of the fifteen Russian peacekeepers killed before heavy weaponry arrived. At least part of Russia's calculation in the febrile months of 2008 has been a desire to hold back in order to let the world see the true nature of the Saakashvili regime. In the event, that stance did nothing to save Russia's peacekeepers, nor did it have any notable effect on western leaders who ignored the fact of the opening attack on Tskhinval in their rush to condemn Russia's response.

But the folly of the decision to attack South Ossetia's capital - whatever its immediate origins - is not Saakashvili's alone. It must be related to the wider pattern of western policy and support for Georgia that has intensified in the Saakashvili era but which was already established in the crucial period of the early 1990s.

The key decision in this respect took place when Zviad Gamsakhurdia's war in South Ossetia was still in progress; when the Zviadist were battling the Shevardnistas in Mingrelia; when threats continued against Abkhazia; when there was no legitimate government in power in Tbilisi; and when chaos reigned across Georgia. At that very moment, the west decided that this was the appropriate time to recognise the country [16] *within its Soviet borders*.

This decision was in line with the international community's arbitrary approach of recognising only the Soviet Union's union-republics (as well as the constituent-republics of Yugoslavia) as separate states. In the case of Georgia, the west had refrained from applying this policy when Georgia was misruled by Zviad Gamsakhurdia; but almost as soon as Shevardnadze returned to Georgia, attitudes changed. A "friend of the west" was in power, and - although no elections were planned until October 1992, and thus even rudimentary democratic legitimacy could

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Thomas de Waal & Zeyno Baran, "Abkhazia-Georgia, Kosovo-Serbia: parallel worlds [14]?" (2 August 2006),

Thomas de Waal, "Abkhazia's archive: fire of war, ashes of history [14]" (20 October 2006),

Nikolaj Nielsen, "A small bomb in Gali [14]" (8 July 2008).

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Neal Ascherson, "Tbilisi,

not yet be claimed - western states (led by John Major's government in Britain - an appropriate echo of its equally disastrous policy in former-Yugoslavia) - rushed to recognise Shevardnadze's government and establish diplomatic relations.

Georgia also gained in this period unconditional membership of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. The result was, for Abkhazia - whose people were then pressing a claim of right to independence - disaster. For Eduard Shevardnadze celebrated his country's joining of the UN by launching his own war on Abkhazia, in an attempt to rally dissenters (including armed Zviadists) to this zealous Georgian nationalist cause. The gamble brought untold destruction; its many victims included the thousands of Mingrelians and Georgians living in Abkhazia. For - although it took thirteen months, and the result was long in the balance - the gamble failed, and the humiliating defeat inflicted on Shevardnadze's troops by the Abkhazians and their Caucasian allies on 30 September 1993 meant the effective loss to Tbilisi of the lush and potentially rich republic.

In spring 1994, ceasefire accords - the equivalent of the Dagomys accords over South Ossetia - were agreed in Moscow. By then, the west's attentions were focused on the Balkan mess it had done so much to create, and it was - how times change - only too happy to leave peacekeeping responsibilities to Russia. As a result, Russian forces constituted almost all of the 3,000-strong peacekeeping contingent along the demilitarised zone adjacent to the Ingur river, Abkhazia's traditional frontier with [Mingrelia](#) [16] in Georgia.

Thus, a further link between Abkhazia and South Ossetia was made, as Abkhazia too - typified by its quiet capital Sukhum (Sukhumi) - became a neglected backwater with little to offer its citizens except to seek work elsewhere or (for those who stayed) to use whatever Russian help was on offer to restore their destroyed infrastructure and economy as best they could (see "[Postwar Developments in the Georgian-Abkhazian dispute](#) [17]", Parliamentary Human Rights Group, June 1996).

The Caucasian satrap

The recognition of Georgia's Soviet [borders](#) [18] - echoed again (among other western leaders) by the quite ridiculous statements of Nato's [secretary-general](#) [19] and Britain's [foreign secretary](#) [20] even as the full effects of Mikheil Saakashvili's misadventure were still emerging - is the source of much of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's agony; and indeed of Georgia's agony too. For since the early 1990s, and notwithstanding its clear culpability in the wars on the two territories, Georgia has - at any point of crisis or argument around either of these "frozen" [conflicts](#) [21] - been able to call upon its fellow United Nations

[Georgia: the rose revolution's rocky road](#) [16]" (15 July 2005),

Donald Rayfield, "[Georgia and Russia: with you, without you](#) [16]" (3 October 2006),

Robert Parsons, "[Russia and Georgia: a lover's revenge](#) [16]" (6 October 2006),

Vicken Cheterian, "[Georgia's arms race](#) [16]" (4 July 2007),

Donald Rayfield, "[Russia and Georgia: a war of perceptions](#) [16]" (24 August 2007),

Alexander Rondeli, "[Georgia: politics after revolution](#) [16]" (14 November 2007),

Robert Parsons, "[Georgia's race to the summit](#) [16]" (4 January 2008),

Robert Parsons, "[Mikheil Saakashvili's bitter victory](#) [16]" (11 January 2008),

Jonathan Wheatley, "[Georgia's democratic stalemate](#) [16]" (14 April 2008),

Robert Parsons, "[Georgia, Abkhazia, Russia: the war option](#) [16]" (13 May 2008),

Thomas de Waal, "[The Russia-Georgia tinderbox](#) [16]" (16 May 2008),

Robert Parsons, "[Georgia's](#)

members to insist on the observation of the principle of territorial integrity; in effect, saying that Georgia can do as it pleases with regard to its "internal" problems and nuisance-peoples.

There is more. Georgia in the 1990s looked likely at times to become a "failed state", and a country ruled by Eduard Shevardnadze could call on all sorts of assistance - not just quite understandable and welcome economic investment, but more worryingly an enormous amount of military equipment and associated training programmes (which accelerated in the period after 9/11 and as Vladimir Putin began to establish a coherent government and a firm foreign policy in Russia after the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin years).

Why did Georgia need such a prodigious amount of armaments, and military equipment of this type? Not even the most deranged Georgian leader would consider starting a war with Russia (a judgment that, admittedly, may have to be revised). Azerbaijan shares with Georgia the interest in peaceful oversight of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which brings both countries considerable wealth. Georgia and Armenia have been rivals for centuries, but there is no hint of any potential military conflict (notwithstanding the disaffection and poverty of the Armenian minority in Georgia's Javakheti region). Georgia and its other neighbour, Turkey, have no grounds for hostility.

The conclusion is clear: the targets of Georgia's military bonanza were South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The outcome was to fuel not just Georgia's military machine but the self-aggrandisement and hubris of those of its leaders who concluded that the west - especially the United States, its chief supplier - would support an armed effort by Tbilisi to restore control over South Ossetia and/or Abkhazia.

This must have been one factor behind Mikheil Saakashvili's monstrous blunder on the eve of the opening of the Olympic games in China's capital city.

The bonds between Abkhazia and South Ossetia forged in the pivotal early 1990s included a mutual defence arrangement. When Georgian forces attacked Tskhinval on 7-8 August 2008, the Abkhazians had to decide how to put this into effect. The decision was made to try to dislodge the Georgian troops who had - in violation of the ceasefire accords - deployed [22] into the upper Kodori (Kodori) valley (part of Abkhazia) in July 2006, an act followed by the transference there of Tbilisi's already-established (on the South Ossetia model) "Abkhazian government-in-exile".

The move towards the upper Kodori valley was both an attempt to present Georgia with a second front [23], and to pre-empt any repetition of the new South Ossetian tragedy in Abkhazia itself. Abkhazian ground-troops entered the gorge at daybreak on 12 August to find that most of the Georgian soldiers had fled; by midnight, the whole area was secure.

The aftermath is revealing. The Russians are reported to have discovered in the materials captured from Georgian military personnel in South Ossetia a series of maps depicting Georgia's plans for a step-by-step capture of Abkhazian territory. On their own account, the

dangerous gulf [16]" (30 May 2008),

Alexander Rondeli, "Georgia's search for itself [16]" (8 July 2008),

Thomas de Waal, "South Ossetia: the avoidable tragedy [16]" (11 August 2008),

Ghia Nodia, "The war for Georgia: Russia, the west, the future [16]" (12 August 2008),

Donald Rayfield, "The Georgia-Russia conflict: lost territory, found nation [16]" (13 August 2008).

Abkhazians found in the centre of the Kodor gorge a plaque (in both Georgian and English) stating: *sainpormatsio tsent'ri NATO-s shesaxeb* ("Information Centre about NATO").

Mikheil Saakashvili's televised speeches [24] - including his effective declaration of war against South Ossetia - are accompanied by the parading of a European Union flag in his office. Georgia is a member neither of Nato nor the European Union, and its symbolic actions in relation to both are evidence of an unresolved political dysfunction.

A path in the rubble

The military and political residue of the war of August 2008 is still far from settled. The diplomatic one awaits. When the ceasefire agreement negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy and accepted by Mikheil Saakashvili and Dmitry Medvedev begins to be fully implemented, the west needs seriously to reconsider its unwise recognition of the country within its Joseph Stalin-set borders. The ground of international law [25] has shifted over Kosovo; it can be moved again to recognise Georgia in its *de facto* borders and to recognise the republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as two new states (see Neal Ascherson, "After the war: recognising reality in Abkhazia and the Caucasus [25]", 15 August 2008).

An understanding of the history outlined in this article - including, once more, the key events of the early 1990s and all that has happened since - is the only way to lay the foundation for peaceful relations between the various peoples living in this part of Transcaucasia.

The negotiations to come must address the difficult issues that have lain dormant since the post-Soviet wars, such as the resettling of the Kartvelian [26] (Mingrelian and Georgian) refugees who fled or were expelled as the Abkhazian war ended. Many have endured wretched [27] conditions in various places in Georgia since 1993: those housed for years in a dilapidated city-centre hotel in Tbilisi were cleared to allow real-estate development, and those living in a part of Tsqneti (lying above Tbilisi) were reportedly displaced again when the land was given by Saakashvili to his ally-rival [28] and former speaker of the Georgian parliament, Nino Burdzhaneladze (also touted in the west as a possible replacement for Saakashvili if and when his western backers tire of him).

One reason for the neglect and/or maltreatment the refugees have suffered under the regimes of Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili is a further insight into Georgia's testing politics: most of them are Mingrelians, which makes them fellow members of the Kartvelian language-family but also kept at a distance by many Georgians (even though many, such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia, have been or become Georgian super-patriots). But this is also a possible key to diplomatic, political - and economic - progress: for if a viable peace can be established in an independent Abkhazia, there will be a greater likelihood that at last many of these hard-working people will be able to restart their lives in Abkhazia.

The days after the short, bitter war have been fraught; the period ahead will contain many dangers. A third flawed post-Soviet Georgian leader has brought disaster on his country. The west's foolhardy reinforcement of nationalist vainglory has helped lead Georgia into another crisis, one that only Georgians can resolve. Meanwhile, the South Ossetians and Abkhazians - whatever Mikheil Saakashvili, or indeed General Mazniashvili, might say [29] - have other plans. The world should listen to them.

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