

South Ossetia and Georgia's aggressive state-integrationism

Written by George Hewitt

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GEORGE HEWITT, JUL 26 2009

Georgia's 'Golden Age' occurred under Queen Tamar (1184-1213), who was three-quarters Ossetian by blood, and one of her consorts, Davit Soslan, was also Ossetian. This is testimony to the dynastic marriages Georgian monarchs contracted with Ossetian royalty, starting with Giorgi I's (1014-1027) marriage to the daughter of the Ossetian king. The Ossetians were a significant power in the North Caucasus until the coming of the Mongols in the mid-13th century and their final crushing by Timur Leng (Tamerlane) at the end of the 14th/start of the 15th century. The mass-settlement of Ossetians in the north of the central Georgian province of Kartli starts from the 1260s. King Giorgi the Brilliant (1314-1346) set a limit to their broad settlement in Shida (Inner) Kartli, but the compact Ossetian population already established here was to form the basis of the later South Ossetia.

Georgians, like the Ossetians, are predominantly Christian, and from the late 18th century alliances were formed with Holy Russia to the north. During the Great Caucasian War (1817-64), which Russia fought for control of the whole North Caucasus, no unified North Caucasian resistance could be formed, partly because of the presence of Russian-supporting Ossetians right in the centre. But, if Georgians and Ossetians should be natural allies, relations deteriorated during the period that Georgians have come to mythologise as their second 'Arcadia', namely the years of independence between the Russian Revolution and the arrival of the Red Army in 1921. South Ossetians, however, do not recall the days of Georgia's Menshevik government so affectionately. And the reasons are easily understood:

'A peasant uprising had already occurred in South Ossetia in 1918 and been suppressed with great severity by the Menshevik People's Guard commanded by Jaliko Jugheli... A Russian-sponsored Ossete force crossed the border from Vladikavkaz [capital of North Ossetia] in June 1920 and attacked the Georgian Army and People's Guard. The Georgians reacted with vigour and defeated the insurgents and their supporters in a series of hard-fought battles. Five thousand people perished in the fighting and 20,000 Ossetes fled into Soviet Russia. The Georgian People's Guard displayed a frenzy of chauvinistic zeal during the mopping-up operations, many villages being burnt to the ground and large areas of fertile land ravaged and depopulated' (David Lang 'A Modern History of Georgia', 1962.228-9).

It was undoubtedly as a result of this that, with Soviet power established in Georgia, the South Ossetians were granted a degree of self-rule in 1922 the South Ossetian Autonomous District (capital Tskhinval) was created. In 1938, as the script for Ossetic in North Ossetia was shifted to Cyrillic, the South Ossetians had to accept a Georgian-based script.

As Moscow's controlling grip began to slacken under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, nationalism exploded amongst the Georgians, with various of the republics' minorities subjected to (at first) verbal lashings. The last Soviet census (1989) put Georgia's Georgian population at only 70.1%, and so, when the nationalist opposition to communist rule started to call for a maximum of 5% of 'guests' on their territory, alarm signals began to ring among the minorities. National forums were created in South Ossetia (Adæmon Nykhas 'Popular Shrine') and in Abkhazia (Aydgylara 'Unity') to defend local interests in the face of the growing dangers emanating from Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. With specific reference to the Ossetians, ridiculous claims were made about the length of their presence in

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the province that Georgians, refusing to recognise the legitimacy of the title 'South Ossetia', started to rechristen 'Samachablo' (Fiefdom of the Machabeli Family); the soon to become first post-communist president of Georgia, the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, even charged that they first appeared in Georgia only in the footsteps of the Red Army (1921). As Georgia moved between November 1989 to June 1990 to prepare a legal basis to secede from the USSR, the Ossetians sought to raise their status and thus increase their autonomy, whilst the Georgian legislature voted to abolish it altogether. Gamsakhurdia-supporting demonstrators travelled to Tskhinval in December 1990, effectively sparking the war that was to cost over 1,000 lives before the ceasefire of June 1992, which provided for a tripartite (Georgian, Ossetian, Russian) peace-keeping force. Before this had been achieved and while Georgia was ruled by the illegitimate Military (later State) Council that had ousted Gamsakhurdia in January, the UK government of John Major (followed by the EU and the USA) took the reckless and needless step in March of recognising Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been invited back by the ruling junta from his Moscow retirement as figure-head to appeal to the West (a brilliantly successful ruse). Georgia's accession to the UN was followed by an even more vicious war in Abkhazia (1992-3). Though the South Ossetians and the Abkhazians have repeatedly and convincingly argued that their rights (survival?) cannot be guaranteed in a unitary Georgian state, for years there was no movement on international support for Georgia's territorial integrity within the Soviet frontiers within which it had been precipitately recognised. But that changed on 26th August 2008 when Russia (followed by Nicaragua) granted recognition to both states.

Along Georgia's frontiers with South Ossetia and Abkhazia there had been a series of shootings and terrorist-incidents, causing many deaths, since the end of both wars. Resumption of hostilities in Abkhazia almost occurred twice (1998 and 2001) under Shevardnadze's lame presidency; his successor, the worryingly mercurial Mikheil Saak'ashvili, promised to return both states to central control during his first presidential term (from 2004), and war almost broke out in South Ossetia that very year, whilst in 2006 Georgian troops were illegally introduced into Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley. With two festering territorial disputes, Saak'ashvili must have feared that his hopes for Georgia's entry into NATO, so unthinkingly promoted by George W. Bush in Bucharest in April 2008, would not be taken forward at NATO's December meeting, to which the decision was deferred. Abkhazian authorities suspected that an attack might come there in May (a suspicion confirmed by the discovery of assault-plans against Abkhazia when the K'odor Valley was finally freed of Georgian troops in August), but it was South Ossetia into which Saak'ashvili (for reasons only he can explain) poured his forces late on 7th August, just hours after reassuring the Ossetians that they had nothing to fear... Russian peacekeepers were among the dead, and Russia responded with overwhelming force to remove further danger and destroy the weaponry stored at bases in Gori (threatening South Ossetia) and both Poti and Senak'i (threatening Abkhazia) and which had been irresponsibly provided to Georgia by America, the Ukraine, Israel and others. The burning of Georgian properties by Ossetian militias that followed the expulsion of the Georgian invaders was regrettable and deserving of condemnation but recalls the 1920 behaviour of Georgian forces in the area. The Caucasus has for centuries been characterised by the custom of vendetta, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov mischievously reminded Saak'ashvili in the aftermath of the fighting. It is perhaps instructive to recall that, after the mid-air collision between a freight- and a Russian passenger-plane a few years ago over central Europe, the Swiss controller whose mistake had caused the incident was tracked down and murdered by a man who had lost his wife and children in the crash – the revenge-taker was Ossetian.

The situation of 'no war, no peace' with ongoing casualties was unsustainable, and Georgia's incursion into South Ossetia provided the catalyst. In the early days of his presidency, Shevardnadze travelled the world warning of the danger of 'aggressive separatism', whereas over the years I have consistently argued that it is rather Gamsakhurdia's/Shevardnadze's/Saak'ashvili's (plus Noë Zhordania's Menshevik) Georgia that has been guilty of aggressive state-integrationism, and, by its unquestioning support for Georgia's 'territorial integrity', the international community fully shares the guilt for the bloodshed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – after four presidents of Georgia, each with Ossetian and/or Abkhazian blood on his hands, Georgia has squandered any moral claim to control the respective territories. Russia, no doubt with motives not wholly altruistic (but then what state ever acts out of pure altruism?), began to slice through the Gordian Knot created by the rash recognition of Georgia in 1992; it is time for the rest of the world to help sever that Knot by recognising the two new states, thereby forcing Georgia to accept that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were lost to it in 1992 and 1993, respectively. Only then can the region move forward to develop new 'modi vivendi' for good-neighbourly relations (including with Russia), which are the *sine qua non* for the stability that all claim to desire. Failing this, South Ossetia will surely sooner rather than later unite with North Ossetia

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in southern Russia, and Abkhazia will be drawn into the Russian bear's ever tighter embrace, presumably not quite the goal behind the international community's misguided determination to preserve post-Soviet Georgia's Soviet borders. What a remarkable achievement for almost two decades of Western diplomatic efforts!

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