

A History of Georgian Conflict

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On August 8th, 2008, the Russian Federation attacked, and occupied the land of the neighboring country of Georgia. Like any current conflict zone, the details are not cemented in history, and two very different views (Georgian and Russian) exist. However this author has tried to decode and interpret the events from a neutral perspective.

Georgian Independence

Georgia, as an independent nation, is a fairly recent development. Although they existed as a successful nation during the middle-ages, they have been a part of the Russian empire since 1801 (except for 3 years during the Russian Revolution). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they successfully declared independence. But, like many newly independent countries, a power-vacuum threw them into civil war. During their civil war, they lost sovereignty over three of their provinces. Ajara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia all won de-facto independence from Georgia. De-facto independence basically means that Georgia has agreed to let those provinces rule themselves, but they still remain legally, and internationally-accepted, a part of Georgia. In part of the agreement with South Ossetia, Russia and Georgia both agreed to station police officers there; that way, no one nation would have sole military control over the province. The Georgian civil war ended with the coup takeover by Eduard Shevardnadze. He ruled for about ten years, but similar to the events in Zimbabwe, Shevardnadze was accused of rigging elections and was peacefully forced out of office. Mikheil Saakashvili, was elected in after the peaceful "Rose Revolution", and is still the current president.

Ajara

During those elections, Ajara, and its pro-Russian government stopped Saakashvili from campaigning there. Armed groups stopped him, and other members of his government, from even entering the province. After mass demonstrations within Ajara, and Georgian military exercises as a show of force, the leader, Aslan Abashidze, fled to Moscow. Soon after, elections were held, and the pro-Georgian party won 93% of the vote. The separatists still claim foul play and continue occasional attempts to separate from Georgia. But, for the most part, Ajara is a quiet and happy province of Georgia.

Abkhazia

In 2006, another incident occurred in the Kodori Valley, Abkhazia. Abkhazia has, since the collapse of the USSR, claimed independence from Georgia. Full scale civil war broke out and, according to several UN accords, Abkhazian separatists committed ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population living there. Georgia, although would obviously like to reclaim Abkhazia, is generally willing to let them remain autonomous. However, one region, the Kodori Valley, accepts Georgian sovereignty, and is directly controlled by Georgia. In 2006, a warlord in that region, Emzar Kvitsiani, unhappy with the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, armed his militia and declared independence from Georgia. Georgia sent a strong police force into Kodori Valley to detain Kvitsiani. Numerous reports point to Russia directly supplying the rebels, and according to a Georgian television station, a Russian helicopter, supplying the rebels, refused to take-off, fearing the Georgians would shoot it down. After six days, all rebels surrendered or were captured, and the leader fled into the Abkhazian capital, Sukhumi. The Russian and Abkhazian governments both claimed Georgia violated a ceasefire/non-intervention agreement. However Georgia claims that military forces were not used, only police units.

South Ossetia

The current conflict began on July 31st, 2008. Two roadside bombs from South Ossetian separatists injured 6 police officers from Georgia. Over the next few days, a Georgian police car was bombed, Georgian cities were shelled, and fighting between South Ossetian forces and Georgian forces broke out. Although the bombing occurred on Georgian territory, Georgian forces pursued the separatist forces into South Ossetia. The Russian and South Ossetian governments claim this act violated the ceasefire agreement; while Georgia claims that the shelling of their cities was a violation by them. On August 3rd, a Russian television station reports volunteers from Russia (mainly North Ossetia) were flooding across the border, assisting the separatist forces. On August 4th, the autonomous South Ossetian government started evacuating civilians across the Russian border. The next day, Russia issues a statement that if fighting continues; they will be forced to intervene. On August 7th, Mikheil Saakashvili issues a general ceasefire. According to the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saakashvili announced unconditional amnesty for separatists who stop fighting. Hours later, during the night, 150 Russian armored vehicles cross into South Ossetia. In response, Saakashvili ends the ceasefire, moving troops into South Ossetia. At 8:00am local time, Georgian aircraft bomb a bridge the Russians are using to transport their troops. A few hours later, Russian and Georgian ground forces engage in general, unrestrained combat within South Ossetia.

Russian Conflict

During that first day of conflict, the Georgian government reports twenty-two violations of Georgian airspace. Those Russian airplanes destroyed military radar installations within Georgian territory and other similar military targets. Also, a Russian fleet in the Black Sea sinks one Georgian ship and damages two others. The Russians claim those vessels violated their security zone, and were legally justified in attacking them. The Georgians claim the fleet contained troop transports, and was blockading the Georgian port of Poti. Also during this time, Abkhazian separatists launched an attack on the Kodori Valley. The Russians also used Abkhazia to move forces into Western Georgia, and open a second front. That force would later seize the port of Poti.

Back in South Ossetia, Russian forces, with the help of total air superiority, quickly overpowered the Georgian troops and pushed them back into Georgia proper. The Georgian forces, afraid Russian troops would attack the capital and depose Saakashvili, positioned themselves along the road to Tbilisi, abandoning the Georgian, central town of Gori. Reports vary when exactly Russian troops moved into Gori, but eventually, they moved into the town. There were no civilian casualties, because all Georgians had evacuated the city before that point. Russians entered the city looking for someone to negotiate with, but they couldn't find a single person in the city government! With the capture of Gori, the only road connecting East and West Georgia was occupied. Once the Russians destroyed the railroad nearby, communication with Eastern Georgia was impossible.

At this time, Georgia issued a general ceasefire, and the Russians also agreed. However, the Russians claimed Georgian troops continued fighting within South Ossetia for several days after. In response, Russian troops ignored the ceasefire and continued capturing towns inside Georgia proper. *(Although this author believes the Russians ignored the ceasefire in order to solidify their position within Georgia, it is entirely possible that isolated Georgian troops continued fighting after the ceasefire was ordered. Georgia retreated very quickly and it is possible that troops were left behind. These troops may not have received the ceasefire order, and continued fighting Russian troops.)*

At the end of open war, Russian troops captured several towns around Gori, and then halted along the main road to the capital, six miles from the Georgian defensive position. On the Eastern front, Russians captured the main cities around Poti and also halted. Three major areas remained in Georgian control: the province of Ajara, the city of Kutaisi (Between Poti and Gori), and Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. After negotiations, Russian troops have withdrawn, however Russian troops remain in several key checkpoints. Two checkpoints remain around the Georgian city of Gori, one on the West side and one on the East side and two "observation posts" remain around the port of Poti. Georgia claims these checkpoints violate the six-point peace plan (discussed later); while the Russians claim pre-war agreements allow the establishment of buffer-zones. Although Poti is outside even the Russian interpretation of buffer zones, Russian troops remain. Negotiations for the future of Georgia, South Ossetia, and the rest of the region are currently ongoing. (*This information is current as of September 4, 2008.*)