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The Conflict in Abkhazia: A Georgian Perspective

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About the Discussion

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The Conflict in Abkhazia

The conflict in Abkhazia ended tragically in the autumn of 1993. Some viewed the conflict as an ethnic clash between Abkhazians and Georgians, but it was much more complex than that. There were many nationality groups involved, including ethnic Abkhazians, Georgians, Russians, the Confederation of North Caucasian Mountain Peoples, Armenians, and Turks. Dr. Gachechiladze provided the following background on the positions of these groups:

Abkhazians for a long time were integrated with Georgians. For social reasons, Abkhazians were cited as Abkhazians on their passports. Being identified as an Abkhazian provided individuals with certain advantages in the former U.S.S.R. and in Abkhazia itself. The highest ranking officials in institutions in Abkhazia were Abkhazians.

From the some 70,000 Abkhazians, only a few hundred started aggravating the situation in Abkhazia. Abkhazian leaders were Leninists and pressed for separation from Georgia. They sought support from people who had been associated with the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union and from the Russian armed forces.

Russia's leaders, dismayed at Russia's loss of status as a superpower, seek to have Russia be at least a regional power. They have never given up their claim of authority over former U.S.S.R. territory and want to restore their authority in these areas. They want to maintain their power and military bases in the territory of the former U.S.S.R.

One of the main targets of Russia's claims was Georgia. The Russians provoked the South Ossetians into fighting for separatism from Georgia. Russia also helped defeat Georgian forces in the fighting with the Abkhazian separatists; with Georgia weakened, Russia was able to restore much of its influence in Georgia.

The civil war in Georgia was inspired, plotted, and provoked by forces from outside Georgia, particularly in Russia. Russian civilian and military intelligence organizations perpetuated the civil war. The Russians denied involvement and spoke of an Abkhazian navy and army, but how could 70,000

people acquire tanks and bombers. Russian Defense Minister Grachev went so far as to claim that Georgians had painted aircraft to look Russian and then bombed the port city of Sukhumi themselves. Professor Gachechiladze indicated that he thought that former Georgian leader Gamsakhurdia did not commit suicide, as was announced, but was killed.

Georgia, weakened by the fighting with the Abkhazians who were supported by Russians and by economic difficulties, was forced to join the Commonwealth of Independent States and to grant official status to three Russian military bases in Georgia. Russian troops are now in Georgia legally.

The Confederation of North Caucasian Mountain Peoples is a relatively new movement established by Chechens designed to unite different nationalities in the area. This movement has a well-organized governing body, and its key uniting force is Islam. The leaders want to unite this part of Russia and then move north.

Their key problem is that they have no access to the Black Sea, and it is for this reason that they wanted Abkhazia to be a part of their confederation. They made Sukhumi the capital of their confederation. With ports on the Black Sea, they could export oil and other resources and bring in armaments, while being free of Russia's control. Their supporters fought on the separatists' side.

Armenia has its own problems with the Nagorno-Karabakh province. Armenia controls one quarter of Azerbaijan's territory and is watching developments in Abkhazia to see if an Abkhazian state emerges that could be used as a precedent or model for Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Armenian officials deny any similarities between Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Some Armenian volunteers formed units to fight against Georgians, and one battalion, known by the name of a Russian World War II general, Bagramian, continued to fight into 1994.

Turkey wants a buffer zone between Russia and itself. Georgia, naturally, is seen as part of that buffer zone. Turkey prefers to have stability in that area, with a peaceful solution and Georgia remaining whole. The Turks have their own problems with the Kurds. Turkey generally supports Georgia's position.

Map of the States of the Former Soviet Union(100k)

Results and Impacts from the War

Turkey did not achieve its goal of Georgia being a stable buffer area between itself and Russia. Russia moved forces down into the area near the Turkish border. The war sets a bad example for the Kurds.

Armenia should see the results of the war as being in Armenia's interest. Armenia can use this as a model for Nagorno-Karabakh, letting Russian troops surround Nagorno-Karabakh while the Armenian population in the province grows.

Abkhazians achieved their goals completely; they won the war. Tragically, however, the population of Abkhazia was decimated; some 10,000 of 70,000 Abkhazians were killed, and many were young males. Leaders in Abkhazia subsequently have invited people from the North Caucasus area and Abkhazians in the Middle East to come and become citizens in Abkhazia.

The Confederation of North Caucasian Mountain Peoples achieved access to the Black Sea, particularly through the port city of Sukhumi. The Confederation, however, will meet resistance from Russia.

Russia achieved its interests. It punished Georgia, which had resisted joining the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Abkhazian conflict was a tragedy, but it serves as an example to other former republics of the Soviet Union of what can happen when they try to remain separate from Russia. The conflict put Georgia on its knees and destroyed its economy. Georgia was forced to look to Russia as the only hope for restoring some stability.

Georgia was a complete loser. The conflict had devastating results, and Georgia went into deep depression and is still under great stress. At least 20,000 people were killed in Georgia, and the number of ethnic Georgians killed in Abkhazia is unknown. Some 300,000 refugees from Abkhazia have had to be distributed throughout Georgia with its small 4 million person population. Georgia used to have a population of 5 million people, but many have fled. Refugees now comprise about one-tenth of the population of Georgia, and there are great problems, including not enough housing. Not only was Georgia's economy destroyed, but Georgia lost one-twelfth of its territory. The tourist industry, which has been very important to the economy, was destroyed. There is a shortage of natural gas, as Georgia has to buy it from Turkmenistan with hard currency. Russia will likely put pressure on Georgia, saying Russia will pay for the gas but only under certain circumstances.

Georgian Government leader Eduard Shevardnadze is a controversial figure. He wanted to do something for Georgia but overextended his capabilities. Having been foreign minister of the U.S.S.R., he was respected in the world and had influence and Western support. It was tragic for both Shevardnadze and Georgia that he neglected the Russian factor in the area. Because he ignored developments in Russia, he got into a tragic war in Abkhazia. He had said that the CIS was born dead and that Georgia would not join it. Shevardnadze is in a dramatic situation now; he has lost the confidence of the people. The war started when he was in office, and he, as commander-in-chief, lost it. Instead of fighting in trenches where troops cannot be supported, he should have attacked at the outset or attacked much later. Some people say Shevardnadze is all that Georgia has that he is the last institution.

Future Plans

Abkhazians will likely continue to pursue a policy of genocide toward Georgians.

Russia will try to pressure Georgia so that it is politically, economically, socially, and militarily dependent on Russia. It will try to keep Georgia poor and dependent.

Georgians will try to be good neighbors so as not to anger the Russians who, if angered, could exacerbate ethnic conflict.

North Caucasians will press for independence, but Russia will resist this because it does not want a strong Muslim state there. Russia may move Russians into the North Caucasus. (Note: As of mid-January 1995, recent events in Chechnya prove that Russia's policy toward Georgia was a failure. Abkhazian victory on the one hand caused a precedent that separatism could win, and, on the other hand, it created the image of the Chechen influence in the area, as a leader not only for the Confederation but also as a separatist force which could oppose Russia.)

Armenia is watching developments in Georgia and Abkhazia with a view to using this as a model for securing Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey, which is friendly with Georgia, is observing the situation and trying not to get involved.

Economic and Military Issues

Iran, Azerbaijan, and Oil Pipelines:

Azerbaijan and Iran are interested in building an oil pipeline through Georgia. A pipeline already exists from Batumi half way through Georgia. Some Georgians used to drill holes in the pipeline and steal oil; the pipeline is now policed. Azerbaijan cut natural gas and oil supplies to Georgia because they thought Georgia was selling these energy supplies to Armenia. Georgia is now negotiating the building of a pipeline from Iran through Armenia and then to Georgia and the Black Sea.

Economic Production:

Tourism and the production of wine, fruit, and preserves have been key components of the Georgian economy. Despite the war's disruption of the tourist trade, tourism and food production will likely continue to be key industries.

Georgians and the Military:

During the war, there was no regular Georgian army. Georgia did not have properly trained officers and soldiers during the war, as Georgians used to try to escape service in the Soviet Army. Border guards had little or no training or discipline.

Volunteers formed in various regions and moved around following their leaders. Paramilitary groups were supported by warlords, and in effect there were mini-states controlled by the mafia.

After the war, the Russians organized the Georgian army. A decree was issued banning all paramilitary organizations. Men were told to give up their arms and go home or join the regular army which is to be based on Russian standards. Forces will include infantry, navy, aviation, paratroops, and some armor.

Russian Forces in Georgia:

Russian forces are deployed at three bases in Georgia. Each of the three bases serves as headquarters for a division. One is in southern Georgia, one at Batumi, and one in Tbilisi. Smaller units are located elsewhere, including at airports, helicopter bases, and air defense sites.

The Russians had several types of aircraft in Abkhazia that were used against the Georgians, including SU-27s, MIG-29s, and helicopters.

A factory in Georgia used to build SU-27 ground attack aircraft, but it has been shut down.

Population

Some have estimated the population of Georgia to be 5,700,000 as late as July 1994, but others say that, with many people having fled, the population could be as low as 4,600,000. As for the ethnic basis of the population, estimates are that 70 % are Georgian, 8% Armenian, over 6% Russian, under 6% Azeri, 3%

Ossetian, under 2% Abkhazian, and 5% others. Prior to the conflict, Abkhazians in Abkhazia, estimated to number 70,000 to 97,000, accounted for about 17-18% of the nearly half million population of Abkhazia; after the conflict, there may be only 60,000 Abkhazians in the area.

Dates/Events

Trouble in Georgia began as early as 1989. In August 1992, Georgia sent military forces to restore authority in Abkhazia; these national guardsmen stormed local government buildings in Sukhumi after Abkhazian leaders moved to declare independence. Fighting continued until a ceasefire agreement was reached on 27 July 1993. In September the Abkhazians broke the ceasefire, and Shevardnadze's forces were defeated in September. In October 1993, Shevardnadze agreed to bring Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States.

(SOURCE: NDU / INSS--Multiple Sources)

Observations and Recommendations

This paper was prepared with the assistance of Mr. James Morrison, Visiting Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies. For more information contact Mr. Jed C. Snyder, Senior Fellow, (202) 287-9210, ext. 549; Fax (202) 287- 9475; or Internet: SNYDER@NDU.EDU. Union: An Updated Overview," September 1992

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