

N U M B E R 8 HIDDEN W A R S C A U C A S U S

WAR IN THE CAUCASUS

BY ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

WHILE world attention has focussed on the Balkans, another center of geopolitical rivalry has erupted into war: the Caucasus. The Caucasus region lays along the 'fault line' between Christianity and both the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam. More importantly, the area has historically been fought over by the three main regional powers — the Russians, the Ottomans (Turks) and the Persians (Iranians). New fighting within and between Caucasian states eerily recalls the proxy wars of long ago, including the Crimean War (1853-56) and the two world wars. Yet the new warfare is being waged with the modern ferocity of MiG jets, tanks, and "ethnic cleansing."

The breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 brought independence to the three Transcaucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. They had briefly achieved independence from Russia after World War I, only to be incorporated into the new Soviet state. Soviet dictator Josef Stalin artificially drew boundaries between these republics in a way to guarantee strife among any future independence movements. Today, many of Stalin's ethnic 'booby traps' are going off, and Moscow's divide-and-conquer strategy is bearing fruit.

In Georgia and Armenia, Moscow still has thousands of border troops guarding the former Soviet frontier. On October 6, only days after the Russian Army crushed the Moscow rebellion, President Boris Yeltsin asked for a revision in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe to allow for a greater Russian mili-

tary presence in the Caucasus.

In addition, autonomous ethnic republics within the newly independent states — as well as in neighboring southern Russia — are pressing for their sovereign rights (see dark shaded areas on map). Most of the current fighting is centered in these autonomous regions, but the seemingly random flare-ups should not be seen as isolated from one another. Any secessions or boundary changes could easily lead to a maelstrom of violence, and more direct involvement by Russia, Turkey, Iran and other powers. Nonviolence International's representative for the ex-USSR, Andrei Kamenshikov, recently returned from the war in Georgia. He comments, "The Caucasus are very unpredictable. Issues cannot be simplified and there are many different players. Anyone who says they

have a clear picture of what is happening doesn't know what they are talking about."

GEORGIA

Georgia is an ancient Christian nation, with its own distinct alphabet and Orthodox patriarch. Ethnic Georgians were aided by fellow Orthodox Russians against the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Black Sea coast until 1829. After Moscow annexed their lands, Georgians became among the most independence-minded of all the peoples in the Russian Empire. However, it was an ethnic Georgian, Josef Dzhugashvili (later Stalin), who blocked any moves toward sovereignty.

When Georgia's independence movement won its longtime goal in 1991, it became the first ex-Soviet republic out-



Tens of thousands of people forced from their Azeri villages by advancing Armenian troops now live in refugee camps. Iran provides tents and rice. Photo ©1993 Jason Eskenazi, Impact Visuals

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side the Baltics not to join the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). But the new government fractured within weeks, and President Zviad Gamsakhurdia fled Tbilisi after the national capital was damaged by fierce infighting. His eventual successor, former Soviet foreign minister (and Georgian Communist chief) Eduard Shevardnadze, drove Gamsakhurdia from his stronghold in western Georgia to Chechnia, a secessionist republic in neighboring Russia.

At the same time, Georgia's own three autonomous ethnic regions pressed for autonomy or secession. First, South Ossetian nationalists fought for merger with Russia's North Ossetia. Second, ethnic Abkhaz — who actually make up only one-fifth of Abkhazia's population — began their fight for an independent Abkhazia that would join Russia. (Ossetians and Abkhaz in Georgia are both Orthodox Christian peoples, though some Muslim Abkhaz live in the adjacent North Caucasus region of Russia.) Third, some Muslim Ajars began to more peacefully agitate for Ajaria's independence or its merger with Turkey (as briefly occurred in 1920-21).

The Georgian government accused the South Ossetians and Abkhaz of merely serving as a front for Moscow, which it said wanted to dismember Georgia in revenge for its refusal to join the CIS. Some Russian troops did protect South Ossetian fighters against the Georgian army, though Russian troops have more recently served as peacekeeping forces jointly with Georgian forces. Russian officers and bomber pilots were captured while aiding Abkhazian fighters, but it remains unclear whether or not they represent a rogue Russian nationalist element in the armed forces. The Abkhazians were also aided by Russian Cossack mercenaries and the Confederation of Mountain Peoples, a group of ethnic minorities who back independence from both Georgia and Russia, and who object to what they call Georgian forced acculturation. The Georgian military (which has been implicated in serious human rights abuses in Abkhazia) has in turn received direct aid and training from the United States. One CIA agent training Georgian forces was killed elsewhere in the country, though it remains unclear whether the

killers were tied to a rebel group.

The year-long war in Abkhazia left over 3000 dead. On September 27, 1993, Abkhazian forces captured the republic capital of Sukhumi. They drove out President Shevardnadze, who had desperately issued appeals for military help to both his rival Gamsakhurdia and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin sent evacuation ships and warned Abkhazian rebels to lift their siege of Sukhumi, but his defense minister Pavel Grachev said that any Russian interventionary force would have to disarm both sides, an offer Shevardnadze refused. During the 11-day siege, a peace march of Sukhumi

soon captured Gamsakhurdia's stronghold of Zugdidi. Shevardnadze was quoted in the *Christian Science Monitor* as saying, "We now face the threat of famine, not only in Georgia but Armenia as well. Azerbaijan is also suffering greatly."

Later in 1993, Shevardnadze agreed to give Russia free basing rights at the port of Poti, raising fierce objections from Georgian nationalists.

ARMENIA

Armenia is another ex-Soviet republic, with a long history of independence and association with Christianity. Its history has been dominated by a struggle with neighboring Turks and Turkic Azerbaijanis. Before World War I, the region of Armenia was split between the Ottoman Empire (in what is today most of northeastern Turkey) and the Russian Empire (in what is today the country of Armenia). During the war, many Armenians fought with the Russian Allies against Ottoman rule. Towards the end of the war and in the period that followed, the Young Turk nationalist movement took genocidal revenge against Armenian civilians, killing at least 600,000 and deporting two million more. An Armenian diaspora was created in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, France, the US and many other countries. The successful "ethnic cleansing" of Armenians from Turkey was later cited by Adolf Hitler as a precedent for his actions. There was little international outcry, though US President Woodrow Wilson proposed that all of Ottoman and Russian Armenia become a US postwar mandate. Wilson's proposal shows an historic US interest in the region, though the Congress did not support it. Instead, the Russian part of Armenia joined a Transcaucasian federation that was soon incorporated into the new Soviet Union, and the rest became part of Turkey.

In 1923, Stalin broke the Transcaucasian republic into Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. In the process, he purposely separated off a large part of the ethnic Armenian population into Azerbaijan in order to ensure that any future attempt at secession would be difficult. Most of these Armenians became part of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous republic within Azerbaijan, while others ended up in the Nakhichevan en-



The Caucasus. Map by Zoltan Grossman.

women called for unity among ethnic Abkhaz, Georgians and Russians, saying that the men on all sides bore responsibility for the war.

After the fall of Sukhumi, Shevardnadze alleged that rebels had executed Georgian government officials, and that Russian forces had overpowered government troops. Gamsakhurdia then returned from exile, announcing that he was the nationalist leader who could hold Georgia together, and vowing to topple Shevardnadze. The changing of Georgia's borders has led to more fighting among ethnic Georgians. Over 250,000 ethnic Georgians have fled Abkhazia. On October 8, Shevardnadze told Yeltsin that Georgia would acquiesce to joining the CIS, and within 12 days Russian forces were deployed in Western Georgia to protect vital supply lines from Gamsakhurdia forces. They



During a demonstration for their president in the Central Square in Grozny, Chechen Republic, in Southern Russia, people take a moment for prayer. Photo ©1993 by Jason Eskenazi, Impact Visuals.

clave of western Azerbaijan, and others within Azerbaijan proper. Some ethnic Azeris also ended up within Armenia.

In 1988, while still part of the Soviet Union, an ethnic Armenian parliament in Karabakh called for unification with Armenia. The move quickly turned into an ethnic Armenian rebellion, which was backed by Armenian nationalists in Armenia and its diaspora. Other ethnic Armenians fled pogroms in Azerbaijani cities such as Sumqayit, while ethnic Azeris left Armenia and Karabakh in fear of the same. With the Soviet breakup in 1991, Karabakh declared itself an independent state determined to rejoin Armenia. The move was supported by Armenia, which joined the CIS and secured some Russian military aid for Karabakh Armenians (a number of Afghan mujahadeen mercenaries have fought for Azerbaijan).

Azerbaijan retaliated by blockading Armenia, including shutting off vital oil pipelines and rail lines. Another oil pipeline through Georgia was blown up by Azeri commandos, though another pipeline through Turkey strangely remained

open throughout much of the conflict. The transport and energy cutoff has caused severe deprivation within Armenia, including blackouts in the capital of Yerevan that have led officials to reopen a nuclear reactor closed after a severe 1988 earthquake. According to the United Nations, 10,000 people have been killed in the war, while one million Azeris and half-a-million Armenians have been displaced.

The conflict in Karabakh — the Russian term Nagorno ("Highland") is rarely used now — has mostly been centered in Karabakh itself. The tide of battle, which has shifted dramatically, rarely led to direct confrontation between the armed forces of Armenia and Azerbaijan themselves. In 1993, however, not only have ethnic Armenians secured control over Karabakh, but they and some fighters from Armenia are now occupying one-fifth of Azerbaijan, driving away thousands of Azeri refugees. Karabakh had been territorially separated from Armenia, but the new conquests join them together. Karabakh Armenian leader Robert Kocharian sees his enclaves as a "second Israel" needing to occupy neigh-

boring territory for "self defense." It is this development that threatens to involve outside military forces such as those of Turkey and Iran.

AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan is the real geopolitical prize in the Caucasus. The massive oil fields around the capital of Baki (formerly Baku) for years supplied the Soviet military-industrial complex. Azeris share a Turkic ethnic background with Turkey, and independent Azerbaijan is the cornerstone of Turkish plans for influence in ex-Soviet states. However, Azeris also share their Shiite Muslim religion with neighboring Iran, which also has historically competed for the region. Azerbaijan also claims chunks of Armenia and Georgia, which both in turn claim sections of Azerbaijan.

The interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran can be seen clearly in recent developments in Azerbaijan. Moscow has played its historical role in curbing the country's independence. Soon after its 1991 independence, Azerbaijan joined the CIS, but in 1992 nationalist Presi-

dent Albufaz Elchibey pulled the country out of the alliance. This year, a violent military revolt ousted Elchibey, ostensibly due to the defeats he presided over in Karabakh. The parliament then restored to power the pre-independence Communist Party chief Heydar Aliyev, who rejoined the CIS. (Turkey and the US continue to recognize Elchibey as Azerbaijani president.) Aliyev is from Naxçivan (formerly Nakhichevan), an enclave of Azerbaijan.

Turkish leaders have often threatened to militarily support Azerbaijan in its war with Armenians. Turkey shares a two-mile border with Naxçivan, which is separated from the rest of Azerbaijan by a strip of southern Armenia. (Azerbaijan wants this strip as a corridor to Naxçivan, while Armenia claims much

of Naxçivan.)

The boundary with Naxçivan is the sole territorial link that Turkey has with the five new ethnic Turkic states of the ex-USSR — Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Adherents of pan-Turkism (the ideology that all Turkic peoples should be united) would like a stronger link between Turkey and its new "sphere of influence." (This fact partly explains the ferocity of Turkish army attacks on Kurdish separatists in southeastern Turkey, who want to create an independent state that would cut Turkey off entirely from Azerbaijan.) With the fall of Karabakh and Armenian occupation of new Azeri territories, Turkish troops are poised along the frontier to protect Naxçivan. In the October 14 *New York Times*, a Turk-

ish official denounced "a grand Russian design, a hidden hand in the Caucasus."

To make matters more complicated, Naxçivan has historically been part of Persia, joining Russia only in 1828. Though Azeris are fellow Shiites, Iran is no friend of Azeri nationalism. Most of Northwestern Iran, in the region around Tabriz, is inhabited by ethnic Azeris. It was occupied by Soviet troops after World War II, who withdrew only after President Truman issued a nuclear threat. Iranian leaders fear that the example of an independent Azerbaijan could lead to rebellion among Iranian Azeris and the creation of a "Greater Azerbaijan" (which would also create a larger Azeri border with Turkey). While Tehran angered many Azeris by maintaining neutrality throughout much of the Karabakh war, it

AUTONOMOUS REPUBLICS IN THE CAUCASUS

COUNTRY ¹	Republic († : Seceded)	Republic Capital	Est. Pop. (1000s)	Main Ethnic Groups (* : Muslim)	History of Foreign Rule
GEORGIA	Abkhazia†	Sukhumi	513	Georgians*, Russians, Abkhaz, Armenians	Ottoman 1500s, Russian 1864, Georgian 1991
	Ajaria	Batumi	385	Georgians, Russians, Ajars*, Armenians	Turkish 1600s, Russian 1878, Georgian 1991
	South Ossetia†	Tskhinvali	98	Ossetians, Georgians	Russian 1784, Georgian 1991
AZERBAIJAN	Karabakh†	Xankāndi (Stepanakert)	180	Armenians, Azeri*	Russian 1813 (Azerbaijan SSR 1923) Azerbaijani 1991
	Naxçivan	Naxçivan (Nakhichevan)	278	Azeri*, Armenians, Russians	Persian 1200s, Russian 1828, Azerbaijani 1991
RUSSIA	Adygea	Maykop	413	Adygeans*, Russians	Russian 1864
	Chechnia†	Grozny (Solja Ghali)	800	Chechen*, Russians	Russian 1859
	Dagestan	Makhachkala	1737	Avars*, Russians, Darsin*, Kumyk*, Lezgin*	Russian 1813
	Ingushetia	Nazran	400	Ingush*, Russians	Russian 1859
	Kabardino-Balkaria	Nalchik	715	Kabardin*, Balkars*	Russian 1825
	Kalmykia	Elista	310	Kalmyks (Mongol Buddhists) Russians	Russian 1500s
	Karachay-Cherkessia	Cherkessk	380	Russians, Karachay*, Abkhaz* Cherkess (Circassians)*	Russian 1828
	North Ossetia	Vladikavkaz	608	Ossetians, Russians, Ingush*	Russian 1802

¹ Note: Armenia has no autonomous republics.

has recently moved Iranian troops into Azerbaijan to set up refugee camps for Azeris fleeing Armenian advances. While a humanitarian gesture, the move also prevents thousands of nationalist refugees from entering Iranian Azerbaijan. At least 30,000 refugees have already crossed the border fleeing Armenian forces, who have been burning villages within sight of Iran.

The rivalry between Turkey and Iran over influence in the ex-Soviet Muslim states has pitted secularism against Islamic fundamentalism, the Roman alphabet against the Arabic alphabet, and pro-US Turkish policies against (until recently) anti-US Iranian policies. Iran has lost the political battle for influence in Azerbaijan to Turkey, and more recently to Russia. But the potential still

remains for the rivalry between Turkey and Iran to grow violent where they most feel their security is at stake. Here, the ethnic crises in the ex-USSR have a real danger of spilling outside the former Soviet frontier.

There is also a distinct possibility of a direct United Nations military role in the context of a peace settlement — involvement that given recent trends could involve US forces. In March 1992, then Secretary of State James Baker raised the possibility of a NATO military role in the Karabakh crisis. There are a number of US bases nearby in the Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey.

SOUTHERN RUSSIA

Russia itself sees the Caucasus as among its most vulnerable flanks, where

ethnic secession could start a virtual repeat of the Soviet breakup. Mostly Muslim autonomous republics — with a total of about 20 ethnic groups — form the southern border of the new Russia, in the area known as the North Caucasus. Many of these mountain peoples fiercely resisted the imposition of Russian rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, taking inspiration from the Chechen Sufi leader Sheikh Mansur (1732-94). In World War II, after German invaders lost the war for the oil-rich region, Stalin accused some of the ethnic groups of collaboration. He exiled many — the Chechen, Ingush, Balkars, Karachay, and Kalmyks — to Central Asia, though they had their homelands restored after his death.

When Russia replaced the Soviet Union in 1991, some of the autonomous republics saw an opportunity for sovereignty. In March 1992, President Yeltsin signed the Federation Treaty with 20 ethnic republics, promising them more autonomy. In southern Russia, the treaty was signed by Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kalmykia. The only two of the twenty-two republics that refused to sign were rich in oil — Tatarstan (in central Russia), and Chechnia (in the Caucasus).

In November 1991, the republic of Checheno-Ingushetia had seceded from Russia. When Yeltsin sent Russian commandos to the republic's capital of Grozny, they were surrounded at the airport and Yeltsin backed down. When Chechen general Jokhar Dudaev declared independence, however, it was not necessarily a universally popular move. First, like elsewhere in Russia, the assertion of autonomy has been carried out largely by regional leaders in order to preserve the privileges they enjoyed in the Soviet era. Sovereignty has not always been used to pass power to an oppressed minority, but ironically to keep power in the hands of a minority elite, or even a local Russian elite. (One of Yeltsin's main challengers in the Moscow October revolt, Ruslan Khasbulatov, is an ethnic Chechen.) Second, the Ingush did not want independence without first reclaiming territories in North Ossetia, and 'seceded from the secessionists' to form Ingushetia. Third, serious power struggles have split even the Chechen leadership.

The Confederation of Mountain Peoples (CMP) wants to unite the region's autonomous republics in an independent North Caucasian Federation. CMP fight-

PEACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS WORKING ON THE CAUCASUS

Amnesty International (Moscow) Contact: Tanya Smith Tel. 7-095-291-2904
Longtime human rights tracking in the region.

Armenia-Azerbaijan Initiative (Stanford, CA) Contact: Steve Kadivar Tel. 415-328-7756 (Fax: 328-7785)
"Building a Common Future" mediation project.

Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (Tbilisi) Fax: 8832-950-855

Nongovernmental and nonpartisan institute in Georgian capital.

Helsinki Citizens Assembly, Panska 7, Prague 1, Czech Republic. Contact: Radha Kumar, Tel. 422-220181 (Fax: 220948)
Winners of Olof Palme Peace Prize in conjunction with Karabakh peace work.

Helsinki Watch (Moscow) Contact: Rachel Danber Tel. 7-095-241-0369
Human rights contacts in region.

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (Moscow) Contact: Valery Tishkov Tel. 7-095-938-1747 (Fax: 938-0600)
Part of Russian Academy of Sciences; works with Bruce Allyn in Boston (Fax: 617-354-8467).

International Alert, 1 Glyn St., London

SEI 15HT. Contact: Jonathan Cohen Tel. 44-071-793-8383 (Fax: 793-7975)

Conflict resolution training in Pyatigorsk, Kabardin-Balkaria, and elsewhere in North Caucasus.

Memorial (Moscow) Tel. 7-095-923-4516 (Fax: 973-2094)

Human rights monitoring.

Nonviolence International, 282 Filow St., Norwalk, CT 06850. Contact: Andrei Kamenshikov Tel. 203-866-184.

Observing conflicts in Abkhazia, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, elsewhere.

Pax Christi International, Oude Graanmarkt 21, 1000, Brussels, Belgium. Tel. 322-502-5550 (Fax: 502-4626)

Human rights fact-finding in Caucasus.

Quaker Peace and Service, Friends House, Euston Rd., London NW1 2BJ. Contact: Alan Pleydell Tel. 44-071-387-3601 (Fax: 388-1977). Also: Akademikan Kroleva, d9/2, Kv. 243, 129515, Moscow, Russia. Tel. 7-095-282-7342.

Work on Karabakh crisis; Bridge building in North Ossetia and Karachay-Cherkessia.

Stanley Foundation (Muscantine, IA) Contact: Dan Clark Tel. 319-263-3021

Recently hosted conference on the Caucasus.

ers aided Abkhazian forces against Georgia, and have been active in defending Chechnia from Russian forces. Ironically, if Russian soldiers have aided the Abkhazians in Georgia, they could find their strategy backfire as Caucasian fighters fight for secession from Russia. Moscow has mediated Georgian- and Abkhazian talks, partly out of fear that session could spread into Russia (or the North Caucasus). One of the reasons Moscow did not meet Georgia's request to seal Abkhazia's border with Russia was that it feared creating instability among the mountain peoples who have always freely crossed the region's borders. But the Russians have little to worry about. The dream of a united North Caucasus has been severely tested by infighting among the ethnic republics. Over 500 were killed in late 1992 as ethnic Ingush fought North Ossetia over the disputed territory of Prigorodny, creating an exodus of 60,000 refugees.

NO SOLUTIONS IN SIGHT

Facing pressure from Russian nationalists, Yeltsin may not back down from his next skirmish with secessionist forces, or with any ex-Soviet states.

Soon after the October putsch failed, police used Yeltsin's state of emergency to evict thousands of Azeri and Chechen small merchants from Moscow. Non-violence International's Kamenshikov says that "what happens in Moscow affects the regions, but what happens in the regional conflict zones also directly impacts what happens in Moscow." While saying that the military does not want a full-blown Caucasian war, Kamenshikov says that "Yeltsin now depends on the military more than the military depends on him. The regions were frightened by Yeltsin's use of force and may be more willing to cooperate, but he should expect more silent resistance and sabotage."

Whether in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, or southern Russia, the new ethnic and political conflicts are clearly related. New leaders use violent ethnic strife to divert their own citizens' attention from worsening economic conditions. Foreign regional powers jockey for position, using local military forces as easily as they dispose of them. Other foreign powers, such as the United States, turn a blind eye to abuses of human and sovereign rights as they

covet the strategic position and resources of the Caucasus. Like elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc, economic 'shock therapy' ensures repayment of foreign bank loans more than it serves to improve living standards. Kamenshikov says that he does not see "too many positive signs," whether in solving current conflicts or in defusing "time bombs ready to explode."

The position of the US will most likely be to back its NATO ally Turkey against Iran, back the Georgian government, use the Karabakh crisis to extract concessions from Armenia and oil from Azerbaijan, and to support Yeltsin's crackdowns to preserve Russia's 'territorial integrity.' In other words, the self-determination of peoples who have fought for centuries against foreign rule will be deemed as less critical than regional "stability." The only real solution is for the ex-Soviet countries to turn into genuine confederations, with equal sovereign rights for each nationality. The blocking of the inevitable drive toward sovereignty will ensure that the present regional power plays degenerate into an ethnic free-for-all. In fact, that may be what has already happened. ■



The sister of a 27-year-old soldier killed in the ongoing conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia is comforted during funeral services. Photo ©1993 by Jason Eskenazi, Impact Visuals.