

Analysis

Russia and Georgia After Empire

By Erik R. Scott, Berkeley, California

Summary

The present crisis between Russia and Georgia can best be understood by looking at the divergent views these two nations have taken of the Soviet past. The author examines the crisis as a post-imperial dilemma, in which tensions run high as both sides struggle to deal with the complicated legacy of a peculiar Soviet empire. The article stresses the role of historical memory of the Soviet past, which is present in the minds of actors on both sides of the conflict and indeed informs many of the actions that have been taken thus far.

The Legacy of Empire

Although it was avowedly anti-imperialist, many historians now consider the Soviet Union to have been a peculiar form of empire. The term is not simply used in a pejorative sense (as it was when U.S. President Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire”), but meant to denote a vast, multi-ethnic polity whose boundaries roughly ran along the same lines as those of the Russian Empire that preceded it, ruled by an exceedingly hierarchical system in which the most important political and economic choices of its constituent republics were decided in Moscow. Unlike other empires, the ethnic character of the Soviet Union’s hierarchy was highly ambiguous. While central institutions were based in Russia and Russian was the empire’s *lingua franca*, the Soviet Union’s elite was multiethnic, with membership in the Communist Party arguably counting for more than ethnic background. And so it was that the Soviet Union, a multiethnic empire unified by powerful political, economic, and cultural institutions subjugated to and centered in Moscow, was ruled for decades by a Georgian, Joseph Stalin.

When it existed, the Soviet Union was described in official rhetoric as a family of nations linked by bonds of friendship as well as by political unity. Each nation had its own characteristics and its own set of ascribed roles, which made the total of the Soviet family greater than the sum of its parts. While the demise of the Soviet state occurred over 15 years ago, the divorce proceedings of the now separated Soviet family are still underway, as longstanding political and cultural ties, fraught with emotional as well as economic meaning, are disentangled, and roles renegotiated. As fellow Orthodox Christians in the predominantly Muslim Caucasus, as prominent Soviet political leaders, and as entertainers famous among Russians for their food and song, hailing from a southern land with near mythical status as a Mecca for Soviet tourism,

the Georgians occupied a special place in the Soviet family. The memory of this former intimacy colors the current crisis in relations between the two nations, a post-imperial predicament in which the strong links of the Soviet empire are painfully but decisively being severed even as a resurgent Russia attempts to project its influence in Georgia and combat what it sees as the pernicious advances of the United States and NATO in the region. The present crisis, which has involved increasingly bellicose rhetoric, a severing of economic and diplomatic ties, and heightened tensions surrounding the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has occasioned not only a revisiting of the Soviet past in both Russia and Georgia but has drawn on a predominantly Soviet-era script as it has unfolded.

Historical Memory and Present Russian-Georgian Tensions

The present crisis between Russia and Georgia can be better understood by looking at the divergent views these two nations have taken of the Soviet past, with resentment at past hierarchies and perceived injustices prevalent in the Georgian post-imperial periphery even as nostalgia for the Soviet Union seems to be growing in the Russian post-imperial center. In May 2006, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili attracted international attention when he attended the opening of the new Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi. While the museum’s focus is on the Soviet repression of the independent Georgian state which existed from 1918 until the Red Army’s invasion in 1921, the term “occupation” in the museum’s name emphasizes the subjugation of Georgia to Soviet power in a larger sense, an injustice that perhaps stretched through the entire Soviet period and one that some Georgians see contemporary Russia as attempting to perpetuate. The museum’s opening attracted scorn and ridicule in the Russian press, and was directly

criticized by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who in an online interview given in July 2006 rhetorically inquired “who occupied whom,” when under Stalin “the entire leadership of the Soviet Union was practically made up of people from the Caucasus” and “all security organs in the Caucasus headed by Georgians,” as well as “nearly all those [security organs] of other national republics.”

Putin’s reference to the Georgian origins of Stalin and others in his immediate circle comes at a time when the Russian state is in the process of selectively reclaiming symbolic aspects of the Soviet past, including the music of the Soviet national anthem (albeit with new lyrics) and the Soviet-era red star for the Russian army. Foreign dignitaries on hand for the sixtieth anniversary celebration of Soviet victory in World War II, held in Moscow in May 2006, saw marchers don a panoply of Soviet-era costumes, perhaps reflecting a belief among the Putin administration that the triumph over fascism, celebrated in Soviet times, might be embraced as the greatest enduring achievement of the Soviet Union.

If Putin hoped the commemorations would serve as a common rallying point for the independent nations and diverse ethnic groups which inhabit Russia and the other Soviet successor states, he was certainly dismayed by the absence of Estonia and Lithuania at the celebration, for whom Soviet triumph was followed by Soviet occupation, and by Georgian President Saakashvili’s decision to not attend the event in protest over the failure of Russia to agree to his proposed timetable for military withdrawal from Georgia.

Russia’s Selective Reading of History: Glorification of the Past

Although the ethnically mixed character of the Soviet leadership complicates Russian claims to the mantle of successor to the Soviet Union, selective historical memory might make it possible for Russia to ignore the less savory aspects of the Soviet past or simply label them as non-Russian. By emphasizing the Georgian character of Stalin, Lavrentii Beria, and others in the security services during the Soviet Union’s most repressive years, Soviet excesses can be attributed to ethnic outsiders. When Putin described the arrest of four Russian officers in Georgia on spy charges in September 2006 as a “sign of the political legacy of Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria,” he simultaneously associated the Georgians with one of their most infamous co-ethnics before an international audience while also distancing Russia from some of the most flagrant crimes of the Soviet past. This complicated past, and its divergent interpretations, remains remarkably pres-

ent in the minds of actors on both sides of the current crisis.

In the Soviet era, Georgians were well-known as prominent artists and entertainers, and famous for their food, the ethnic cuisine of choice in the Soviet Union and one inevitably paired with Georgian wine. Another popular stereotype common in Soviet humor and anecdotes, and one which may have, to a limited extent, reflected reality, was that of Georgians as well-placed in the world of organized crime and corruption. The economic turmoil which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing civil war which engulfed Georgia in the early 1990s led thousands of Georgians to seek work in Russian cities. With their arrival, the number of Georgian restaurants in Moscow and St. Petersburg skyrocketed, and many Georgian artists either took up residence in Russia or toured there frequently since earning a living in Georgia became ever more difficult. And, if Russian press reports are to be believed, Georgians came to occupy an even more important position in Russia’s criminal underworld. Yet the prominence of Georgians in such positions—licit and illicit—a combination of their ethnic distinctiveness and occupational specialization (it is common for diaspora groups to seek out professional niches) and the persistence of Soviet-era stereotypes (and, perhaps, the ability of some Georgians to capitalize on them for profit and prestige), obscures the fact that most Georgian migrants work in more mundane professions.

Russian Sanctions Against Georgia: Following a Soviet Script

Monetary remissions sent by Russia’s Georgian diaspora to friends and family members in Georgia are rightly seen as a major source of economic stability for the South Caucasus nation. Interestingly, recent Russian reprisals against Georgia not only targeted the Georgian diaspora in general terms by imposing visa restrictions and enforcing tough immigration rules but have specifically taken aim at those specialized roles for which Georgians were famous in the Soviet period. In pursuing this course of action, it is as if Russian authorities are referring to a decades-old Soviet script. In spring 2006, Russia instituted a ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, allegedly on health grounds, depriving Georgian entrepreneurs of their ability to deliver two of Georgia’s best known products to the lucrative Russian market. In October 2006, following the spy row between Russia and Georgia, authorities in Moscow began targeting Georgian-operated businesses, amidst frequent reports on state television that Moscow was in danger of being

overrun by the “Georgian mafia.” In several instances, Russian law enforcement authorities searched and inspected some of Moscow’s most popular Georgian restaurants. Georgian entertainers also came under fire in the Russian capital, with authorities deciding to cancel a performance of the Georgian State Dance Ensemble in light of new visa restrictions on Georgians. The very roles ascribed for Georgians in the Soviet “family of nations” have come under attack, revealing the complex imperial legacy of interdependence between the two nations that makes separation such a difficult and painful process.

Even as the harsh actions taken against the Georgian diaspora by the Russian authorities, measures which include ethnic profiling, harassment, and deportation, have drawn on Soviet-era tendencies and stereotypes, they have also touched on a more recent strain in Russian society of xenophobia in general and distrust of Caucasian migrants more generally. In a way perhaps ironic to those outside the region, people from the Caucasus are crudely referred to as “blacks” by racist Russians. Much as Britain and France have struggled with the arrival of migrants from their former colonies, the years following the Soviet collapse have seen the arrival in Russian cities of many migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia seeking work and social betterment. This migration, combined with ongoing conflict in Chechnya and a resurgent ethnic Russian nationalism has placed renewed emphasis on the otherness of those with Caucasian heritage, even if these “blacks” were once part of the Soviet family and many are in fact Russian citizens.

Restoring an “Informal Empire”?

While Russia’s wielding of its economic might to project its influence and construct what some describe as an informal or “liberal” empire in the former Soviet space are the subject of much discussion, it remains unclear whether such a project is driven by economic goals, political considerations, nostalgia for the Soviet empire, or some combination of the three. Such a lack of clarity of purpose makes Russia’s long-term goals unclear. Russian bans on Georgian products and the Russian decision to sever transport links with its southern neighbor have negatively impacted the Georgian economy in the short run, but in the long run will force Georgians to seek new markets for their goods outside Russia. Similarly, Russian energy giant Gazprom’s move in December 2006 to double natural gas prices for Georgia certainly ramps up the pressure on Georgia’s government but also increases the incentive for the Georgian authorities to diversify their energy supply, which they have sought to do in

recent discussions with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Iran. Thus far, Russia’s actions have damaged the prospects for profitable trade with Georgia, rallied the Georgian people around a Georgian government beset in the past year by several domestic scandals, and attracted the critical gaze of the international community. While future developments may yet show Russia’s strategy to be an effective one, for now Russia’s actions seem to reveal the legacy of a system in which commands, punishments, and rewards were handed down a hierarchical chain from on high in Moscow.

Russia and the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Russian involvement in breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two self-proclaimed statelets which seek independence from Tbilisi, has proved to be perhaps the greatest irritant in Russian-Georgian relations. Russian economic activity in the two territories is essential for sustaining the de facto authorities there, and the incorporation of the unrecognized statelets into the Russian Federation has been discussed in the Russian Duma despite Russia’s official promise to respect the territorial integrity of Georgia. Yet, here too Russia’s long-term goals and motivations seem unclear. Russia’s current ban on agricultural imports from Georgia recently prevented a large shipment of tangerines originating in South Ossetia from entering the Russian Federation, leading to a protest by merchants and truckers from South Ossetia who felt the ban should not extend to them. It remains unclear how evenly Russia will enforce the ban, but further moves like this one could build resentment toward the Russian authorities among residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, while discussion of incorporating the two breakaway territories into the Russian Federation worries the Georgian authorities and causes unrest among an international community intent on reaching a settlement in Kosovo (a case which some Russian policymakers have likened to that of the two unrecognized statelets), the redrawing of international borders could prove unsettling for Russia, with its numerous and ethnically diverse autonomous regions and its ongoing efforts to subdue violence in Chechnya, another territory with a claim on independence.

Yet in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Soviet imperial legacy also weighs on Georgia. Although historically enjoying ties with Georgia, Abkhazia was initially granted the status of a union republic by the Soviet authorities until being made an autonomous republic within Georgia by Stalin in 1931. The downgrading of the territory’s status by

Stalin and the subsequent encouragement of Georgian migration to Abkhazia by Beria are decisions that may have been made in the interests of Soviet state centralization but are seen by many Abkhaz as the nationalist actions of Georgians who happened to occupy top Soviet positions. The ethnic balance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the Soviet period was a delicate issue, as both regions had large populations of not only Abkhaz and Ossetes but also of Georgians, Russians, Armenians, and others. It is arguable that such multiethnic polities had a better chance of surviving in a larger empire where their existence was not so anomalous than within the confines of an independent Georgia. At the advent of Georgian independence in 1991, authorities and titular ethnic groups in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia feared domination by Georgians in a predominantly Georgian state, an understandable anxiety given official proclamations of exclusive Georgian nationalism in the early 1990s. Ongoing conflict has forced many Georgians to flee the two breakaway territories. The remaining population in the two areas, while seemingly still desirous of autonomy, has turned to Russia as the successor to the overarching Soviet state as protector of their fragile independence and most in the statelets speak Russian, use the Russian ruble, and have accepted Moscow's offer of Russian citizenship. When addressing the issue of the breakaway regions, Georgia must grapple with a complex past in which Soviet policies both served to incorporate Georgia into a larger Soviet empire while also grouping ethnically diverse regions under the auspices of a Georgian republic. After empire, the territorial dimensions of the Georgian state remain unclear and unresolved.

A Conflict of Emotions

Finally, the post-imperial aspect of the crisis of Russian-Georgian relations gives the situation an emo-

tional tenor in which symbolic gestures and rhetoric are extremely important. Cases of spying routinely emerge around the world, but Georgia's decision to parade four Russian officers charged with spying on national television reflected the confrontational and perhaps overconfident attitude of a newly independent nation asserting itself against the former imperial center. This move outraged Russian sensibilities, provoking anger that Russian citizens could be treated in such a rough manner by a small former Soviet "brother" republic. Russia's response was similarly disproportionate, revealing wounded national pride and culminating in a vengeful attempt to punish its neighbor for courting NATO and for directly challenging Russia in such a manner.

Emotions aside, the geopolitical factors which gave rise to Russian-Georgian tensions remain. Russia is understandably interested in maintaining security at its borders and preserving its traditional sphere of influence in the Caucasus while Georgia seeks to consolidate centralized control of its territory and pursue new opportunities in partnership with the United States, the European Union, and NATO. Yet past resentments, wounded pride, and a failure of these nations to enter into calm, neighborly relations as sovereign states on equal footing—all part of the imperial legacy—causes emotions to run high, making the situation much more incendiary than it might otherwise be. Inability to deal with the Soviet imperial legacy will hinder chances at a more neutral dialogue between the two nations, leaving tensions to simmer even as upcoming presidential elections in Russia and Georgia might tempt candidates in each country to play upon lingering resentments for political gain.

About the author

Erik R. Scott is a Ph.D. student in History at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is writing his dissertation on the Georgian diaspora in the Soviet Union.