



August 24, 2019

## ENTER THE CAUCASUS: GEORGIA

I think that every country in the Caucasus deserves an introduction. Especially one whose mention must always be followed up with, “No, the *country*.” Maybe the rest of the world is up on their geography game, but I’m betting most Americans aren’t thinking of the small Caucasian country south of Russia when someone mentions Georgia.



It blipped on the news for a little while back in 2008, when Georgia went to war with Russia for about ten days. But, as is the case with every former Soviet state, the history is super complex and has been building to a head for *decades*. I don’t mean to be introducing Georgia in the context of its war with Russia, but the 100-year leadup to that point is necessary for getting the full picture of Georgia today.

So, let’s go back to the beginning for a minute here.

### GEORGIAN HISTORY FOR NOOBS

Like its neighbors in the Caucasus and its former SSR counterparts, Georgia came under the Soviet Union early in the 1920’s. In Georgia’s case, it was 1921. Keep that date in mind.

A few (like 10) centuries prior, “Georgia” was more of a cultural region, home to, at the time, a more or less Georgian ethnic group. It remained this way for a disputed amount of time. Historians can’t agree on the arrival of the next major ethnic group, but it was probably between the 13th and 14th century. This ethnic group was the Ossetians.

For hundreds of years, the Georgians and Ossetians coexisted peacefully and as such there was never any sort of border separating the groups. But in 1918, things got tense in a region of central Georgia called Shida Kartli. Ossetians living in the area had been influenced by Bolshevik ideologies, and decided they wanted ownership of the land they worked. The land was owned by Georgian nobility, who were backed by the Menshevik government in Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital.

The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were rival political factions in the USSR. In a very tiny nutshell, Bolsheviks believed in the necessity of a revolution orchestrated exclusively by the proletariat, or the working class. These guys were some of the primary groups responsible for the Russian Revolution that ended the monarchy.

So in this case, the Ossetian peasants were the proletariat.

The Mensheviks believed that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or the elite upper class, should collaborate. In short, Bolsheviks were revolutionaries and Mensheviks were moderates.

Now back to Georgia and the USSR.

Originally, the Ossetians were just unhappy with the economic policy of the Menshevik government. But by 1920, things had escalated into ethnic conflict. The Soviet Union secretly backed and supported Ossetian uprisings in 1919 and 1920. Still, the uprisings were defeated by the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

In 1921, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was invaded by Russia and became the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, or GSSR. Once the Soviet government was installed, they created an autonomous region for the Ossetians in 1922. This was the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. Many believe the Ossetians were awarded autonomy for their support against the Georgian government, as they had never been autonomous before.

It was business-as-usual for Soviet Georgia after that, until the rumblings of the USSR’s imminent collapse came in 1989. A Georgian independence movement was gaining traction, and so the deteriorating Russian government endorsed South Ossetian nationalist movements in hopes of curbing the Georgian movement. In 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Georgia (the first stage of what became Georgia’s independent government) annulled South Ossetia’s independence, which resulted in some military conflict.

Georgia declared its independence in 1991. South Ossetia was now openly aided by formerly Soviet military units, and the two were on the brink of war by 1992. It was at this time that another breakaway region in Georgia, Abkhazia, carried out a campaign of ethnic cleansing mostly via deportation against ethnic Georgians, cutting the population of the region from 525,000 to 215,000 (that’s 60% of the population). The Georgian government negotiated a ceasefire in Ossetia, and the situation remained shaky until 2004.

Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, a peaceful and dramatic change of power to a pro-Western government, the reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia became a priority once again.

There was a period of intense fighting in South Ossetia in 2004. In 2005, the new Georgian president proposed peace under the condition that Ossetia become part of Georgia once again. The proposal was rejected by Ossetia’s government, but Georgia managed to install a government there by 2007.

Major peace talks began in 2008, hosted by the EU and Germany on separate occasions. None were attended by Russia or the separatists in Abkhazia and Ossetia. Later that year, in April, Putin (in the final month of what was, constitutionally, supposed to be his final presidential term) officially gave Russia’s recognition to the regions as independent. As you can imagine, that didn’t go over well with Georgia or any of its Western allies, namely the US, UK, France, and Germany.

While the UN and Georgia worked to restore the regions to Georgia and to relocate exiled Abkhazians back to Abkhazia, Russia continued to deploy peacekeeping forces to the regions. Things deteriorated quickly. There was an assassination attempt on the Prime Minister of Ossetia, who was backed by Georgia. Georgian soldiers were captured by Ossetian forces. An Ossetian militia official was killed in a bomb blast. In mid-July, the US and Russia began nearly identical military trainings (on the same day!). US training also brought troops from Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Open hostilities began August 1st with an IED bombing near Tskhinvali, the capital of Ossetia, which injured several Georgian policemen. The Georgian response killed several Ossetians. A week later, the Georgian president declared a ceasefire on TV, which was followed by intense Ossetian attacks on Georgian villages. Georgia immediately moved on Tskhinvali, and Russia attacked Georgia in return. A few days later, Russian forces moved into Georgia from Abkhazia, and Georgia found itself fighting on two fronts.

In the final days of the month-long war, French president Nicolas Sarkozy and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made peace efforts. Sarkozy brokered a ceasefire, and the Georgian president signed a peace agreement with Rice’s attendance. At the same time, Russian forces were within 40 miles of Tbilisi.

By August 22, Russian forces were mostly withdrawn and roads between Ossetia and Georgia were mostly reopened.

On August 26, new Russian president Medvedev signed decrees recognizing the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

### GEORGIA TODAY

Georgia continues to assert that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Georgian regions under occupation by Russia. South Ossetia’s recognition as independent is in flux, as is Abkhazia’s. Abkhazia has been recognized by Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria. It’s also been recognized by Russia and South Ossetia, obviously.

The status of these places and relations with Russia remain a *very* sore point in Georgia. In fact, a stamp from Abkhazia in your passport can get you banned from Georgia *permanently*.

Today, though, Georgia is looking forwards. It’s definitely still struggling and there is some poverty, but it’s safe to visit and more tourists visit every year. Things are improving. Its economy is among the fastest-growing in Eastern Europe, though economic pressure from Russia keeps Georgia from climbing too fast.

### THE NAME

One thing that’s always perplexed me is the origin of the name “Georgia.” Since, you know, there’s two Georgias.

In the case of Georgia, *the country*, the etymology is iffy. Some say that it comes from the Persian word for the ethnic Georgians, “*gurgan*,” meaning “wolf.” Don’t forget, after all, that despite feeling very European, Georgia has been under the Persian mantle before. Ancient Persians referred to the region as “*Gorgan*,” or “Land of the Wolves.”

Another theory came from traveler Jacques de Vitry in the 13th century, who noticed the popularity of Saint George among the predominantly Christian region. Hence, Georgia.

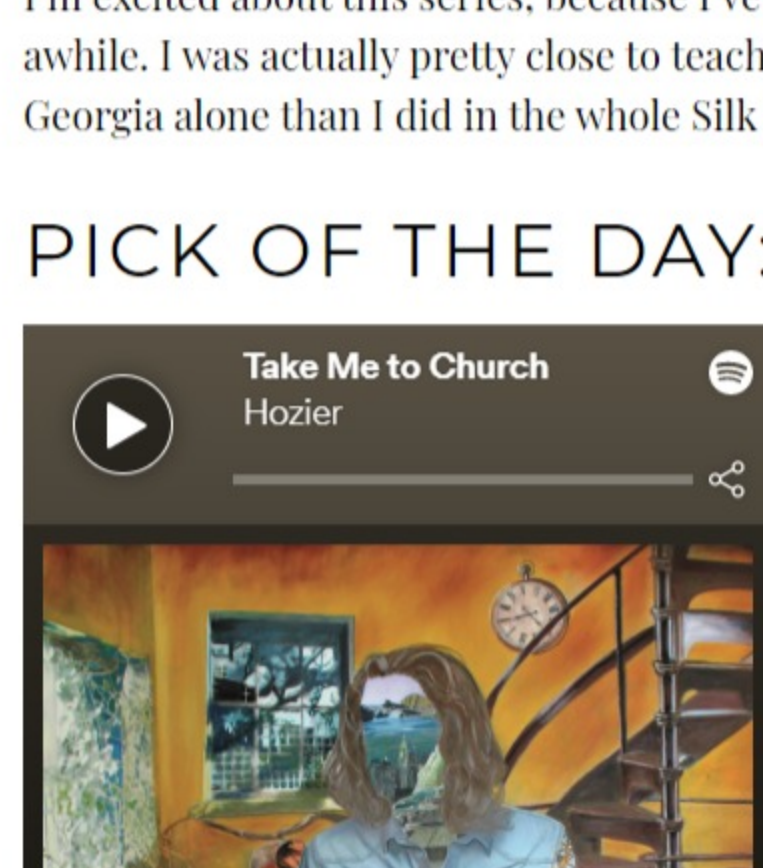
Another theory is that the name comes from an ancient Greek word that means “tiller of the land.” Georgia has a rich agricultural heritage, and is one of the oldest wine regions in the world!

In the case of Georgia, *the US state*, the name was for King George II, who granted the state its charter. So, a lot less interesting (to me), and totally unrelated!

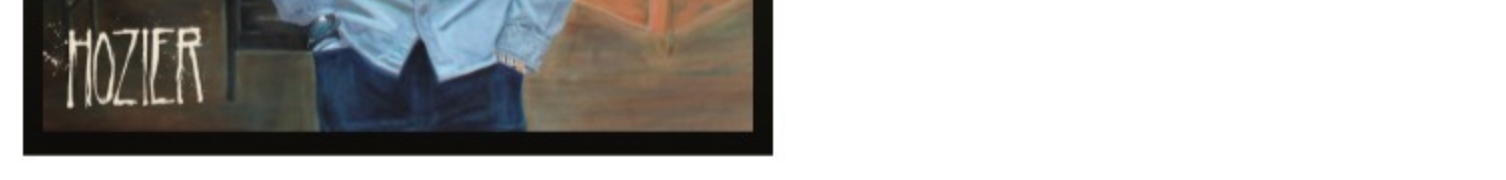
Now stay tuned for the next few posts about Georgia, where I join forces with my older brother.

I’m excited about this series, because I’ve been wanting to come to Georgia for quite awhile. I was actually pretty close to teaching English here! I also took more photos in Georgia alone than I did in the whole Silk Road leading me here, so get ready.

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