

Ossetians

Profile

Ossetians speak Ossetic, a language of the North Iranian language group and are thought to have originated in the fusion of nomadic, Sarmatian and indigenous populations of the North Caucasus in the fourth century, with the Sarmatian (later called Alan) element dominant.

Approximately 70,000 Ossetians lived in the autonomous region of South Ossetia in 1989, with a further 100,000 elsewhere in Georgia before the outbreak of the conflict. According to the Georgian Census of 2002, 38,000 Ossetians remained in undisputed Georgian territory, accounting for 0.9 per cent of Georgia's population. Many Georgian residents of the autonomous region fled as a result of the 1989 conflict, but an estimated 20,000 remained in villages typically intermingled with Ossetian villages. There has been significant intermarriage between Ossetians and Georgians, but statistics are unavailable. There are no reliable data for the total population of South Ossetia today, although prior to the August 2008 war between the Georgian army and South Ossetian and Russian forces, it was thought to be in the region of 70,000. Many ethnic Georgians fled or were driven from South Ossetia during and after the conflict, but the extent and duration of their displacement remain difficult to determine.

A further 300,000 Ossetians live in the Republic of North Ossetia – Alania (a subject of the Russian Federation).

Historical context

Ossetian settlement in Georgia, composed of the Tualläg subgroup, has been a gradual process beginning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ossetians are primarily Orthodox Christian with a small Muslim element. Ossetians enjoyed a brief period of unity in 1905 when they were grouped together in one national district; however, since then, like other groups in the Caucasus, they have been subjected to numerous border changes and Stalin divided them between the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia.

Despite the fact that the majority of Ossetians in Georgia lived outside the autonomous region, and that Ossetians were one of the most Georgianized of the republic's minorities in linguistic terms, Georgian moves towards independence created tensions with South Ossetia in the 1980s. Mobilization by the South Ossetian Popular Front (Adaemon Nykhas in Ossetic) against perceived discrimination followed the promulgation of legislation strengthening the status of the Georgian language in August 1989. These demands soon turned into requests for unification with North Ossetia. The local Georgian population protested, which led to clashes in December 1989 and the dispatch of Soviet Interior Ministry troops in January 1990. As the year progressed, the South Ossetians, like other minority groups, felt increasingly marginalized from a political arena that excluded participation by regionally or ethnically based parties in the autumn elections.

The central authorities resisted the South Ossetian declaration of sovereignty in September 1990, culminating in the abolition of South Ossetia's autonomous status at the end of the year and the deployment of the Georgian National Guard in the capital Tskhinvali. The imposition of National Guard rule over the territory led to widespread human rights abuses. Following the South Ossetian declaration of independence in December 1991 the intensity of the conflict increased, leading to the displacement of thousands of people. The outflow of refugees into North Ossetia (in the Russian Federation) had an impact on the development of the conflict between North Ossetia and Ingushetia (see [Russian Federation](#)). Georgian attempts to reassert control over the territory were hampered by both political turmoil in the country as a whole and by the fact that South Ossetia received support from North Ossetia and other areas of the northern Caucasus, as well as covert support from Russia. A ceasefire agreement was reached in Sochi between Georgia and Russia on 24 June 1992, providing for a peacekeeping force, the setting up of a control commission and joint Ossetian–Georgian patrols, observed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Tbilisi.

Current issues

In the conflict zone of Tskhinvali, ethnic Ossetian villages were interspersed with ethnic Georgian villages, as well as those of mixed ethnicity, and there was some intermarriage between Ossetians and Georgians. Prior to the outbreak of conflict in August 2008, Russia assiduously distributed passports to Ossetians in the territory. 'Protecting Russian citizens' thus became a lead rationale for war with Georgia.

The Georgian offensive on Tskhinvali in early August 2008 caused disproportionate suffering by Ossetian civilians there. With Russia's swift backing of Ossetian militias, the tables quickly turned, and ethnic Georgians were targeted. By mid-August, UNHCR reported that around 15,000 ethnic Georgians had been displaced from South Ossetia, while 30,000 ethnic Ossetians had fled the territory, mostly for North Ossetia in Russia. At the end of the month, Human Rights Watch reported that an analysis of UN satellite photos clearly showed the intentional 'torching' of five ethnic Georgian villages near Tskhinvali – all carried out after the period of active hostilities, and none showing evidence of shelling. HRW said its researchers had themselves witnessed Ossetian militias in the act of looting and burning Georgian villages. International journalists visiting the area confirmed the looting, burning, and even some bulldozing of houses belonging to ethnic Georgians. In interviews, many Ossetians were blunt about the destruction being aimed at preventing the return of their ethnic Georgian former neighbours.

While the conflict was ongoing, Russia requested an investigation by the International Criminal Court of alleged Georgian war crimes against South Ossetians. ICC Prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo said that the situation was 'under analysis'. Even when active hostilities ended, Russia maintained troops in South Ossetia and stated it would leave 3,800 in the territory. In September, Georgia filed cases against Russia before the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. It sought an ICJ order for the removal of Russian troops, compensation, and the return of displaced persons. Tbilisi claimed that by killing and displacing ethnic Georgians in areas of Russian occupation, Moscow was violating the UN Convention on Racial Discrimination, as well as articles 2 (right to life) and 3 (prohibition on inhuman and degrading treatment) of the European Convention on Human Rights. Russia contested the claims, saying that its troops had acted to save ethnic Russians and Ossetians.

Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities visited the conflict region in mid-September, but was not allowed to enter South Ossetia. He stated that this raised 'serious concern about the situation in South Ossetia and the adjacent areas under Russian control...The fact that the international community does not have access to some parts of South Ossetia and the villages adjacent to it gives rise to suspicion that there is something to hide there.'

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International relations

Russia recognized South Ossetian independence in August 2008, but as of October 2008, only Nicaragua has followed suit. As an largely unrecognized entity, South Ossetia cannot participate in international agreements and conventions.