

Op-ed column: The media got it wrong: Russia did not invade Georgia, it's the other way around

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William Brown/Tribune Media



Being on vacation, I had told my editor that I wouldn't have a new piece for this Sunday, but something happened that changed my mind. Whether home or away, libraries are my favorite haunt, so, while waiting for a table at the nearby Captain's Table, Jean and I sat on a bench in front of the Chatham library on Cape Cod.

Sitting near us a woman on another bench and a young man on the library steps were each typing furiously on their laptops. Could they be within range of Wi-Fi, I wondered? So I asked the young man if he was picking up a signal from the (closed!) library. "Why, yes," he said, "this is the best time to do so, given that there is no one inside with whom I have to share bandwidth and thus reduce response time."

I became conscience-stricken by such rampant assiduousness, and since our rented cottage was a hot spot, I went back to my own laptop after dinner, determined to tell you how the mainstream press has, by and large, gotten the Russian battle with South Ossetia all wrong.

The impression that most Associated Press stories conveyed, and some even in The New York Times, has been that Russia invaded part of Georgia. But it is closer to the truth that the opposite is true. This finally sank into my cranium when I read a column in, of all places, the Cape Cod Times of Aug. 18, the day of this epiphany. The author, Gwynne Dyer, an international columnist from London, wrote: "Russia didn't threaten Georgia; it responded to a surprise attack on South Ossetia, a territory where there were Russian [and Georgian] peacekeeping troops by international agreement. It has not occupied Georgia's capital, nor has it overthrown the government (though the Georgians may do that themselves when they realize what a fool [their President, Mikhail] Saakashvili has been)."

Yes, the Russians overreacted, drove deep into Georgian territory well beyond South Ossetia, killed many people, and have started to withdraw back into South Ossetia. But that's as far as they will go. Fully 70 percent of the greatly depleted population of that "province," or whatever it is, hold Russian citizenship and very much want to become, like North Ossetia (to its north, obviously) one of the units of the Russian Federation.

Now, with our forces so bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is nothing that the United States can do about this. It is certainly not going to start a third world war, hot or cold, over it. President Bush may or may not realize this, but surely both presidential candidates do. But they have no recourse except to posture, saying of the Russians, in effect, "There they go again."

Sen. Obama suggests that the matter be referred to the U.N. Security Council, forgetting (?) that in that venue, Russia has veto power. Even worse, Sen. McCain, whose documented forgetfulness is that Afghanistan lies

between Iraq and Pakistan and hence the latter two have no common border, blusters like the Great Oz behind a curtain. And the voters are sure to look behind it.

As of 20 years ago, South Ossetia had 65,000 native Ossetians, 29,000 people who considered themselves Georgians, and practically no “Russians.” By now, many of each have fled the area, and most of those left consider themselves Russian. Despite this fact, and despite the fact that his army has been obliterated, President Mikhail Saakashvili has vowed that “Georgia will never give up a square kilometer of its territory.” Essentially, it already has.

Geographic locale

But before we venture further, just what and where is this foreign Georgia and the rebellious South Ossetia contained therein? Wikipedia to the rescue.

The country of Georgia lies to the south of the Russian Federation (Russia), from which it is separated by a natural boundary formed by the Caucasus mountain range. It is a transcontinental country, partially in Eastern Europe and partially in Southwest Asia. It is bordered to the east by Azerbaijan, to the west by the Black Sea, to the south by Armenia, and to the southwest by Turkey. Georgia’s area, about 27,000 square miles, lies between that of our states of South Carolina and West Virginia, both breakaway federal entities of our own, the latter because it took the Union side in our Civil War. Georgia’s population of 4.6 million is comparable to that of our Alabama and is about half of our own Georgia.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Georgia had a brief period of independence as a Democratic Republic from 1918 until the Red Army’s invasion of 1921. Georgia became part of the USSR in 1922 and did not regain its independence until 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. Georgia is currently a representative democracy and is a member of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the World Trade Organization. To the consternation of Russia, the country seeks to join NATO and, in the longer term, admission to the European Union.

As the map at top right shows, the country of Georgia looks much like a crocodile, but its tail to the northwest and its right hind leg are, respectively, the self-proclaimed independent republics of Abkhazia and Adjara, but no other country other than Georgia — certainly not Russia, which has designs on the former — has recognized them. Historically, there have been dust-ups over the status of both, but they were nothing compared to the currently raging battle over the status of South Ossetia.

South Ossetia is a region in the extreme north of Georgia, just over the border from the Russian federal republic (oblast) of North Ossetia. It declared itself to be the independent “Republic of South Ossetia” early in the 1990s. The capital of South Ossetia is Tskhinvali, even though South Ossetia lies within the Georgian region called Shida Kartli, whose capital is Gori.

Not recognized

The claimed independence has not been diplomatically recognized by any member of the United Nations, which continues to regard South Ossetia as part of Georgia. Until the armed conflict of this month, Georgia had retained control over parts of the region’s eastern and southern districts where it created, in April 2007, the Provisional Administrative Entity of South Ossetia.

Barack Obama has promised me (and at least a million others) that he will send us e-mail (or one of those hated text messages) that tell us of his vice presidential choice. You may know who that is by the time you read this. For his sake, I hope it is Sen. Joe Biden, the only politician left in Washington who makes sense when he speaks of foreign affairs. As to domestic affairs, we’ve had our fill of those.

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