

Dangerous Supply:

SMALL ARMS AND CONFLICT IN THE REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA



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An Abkhaz soldier in the Kodori Gorge, separating Abkhazia from Georgia.

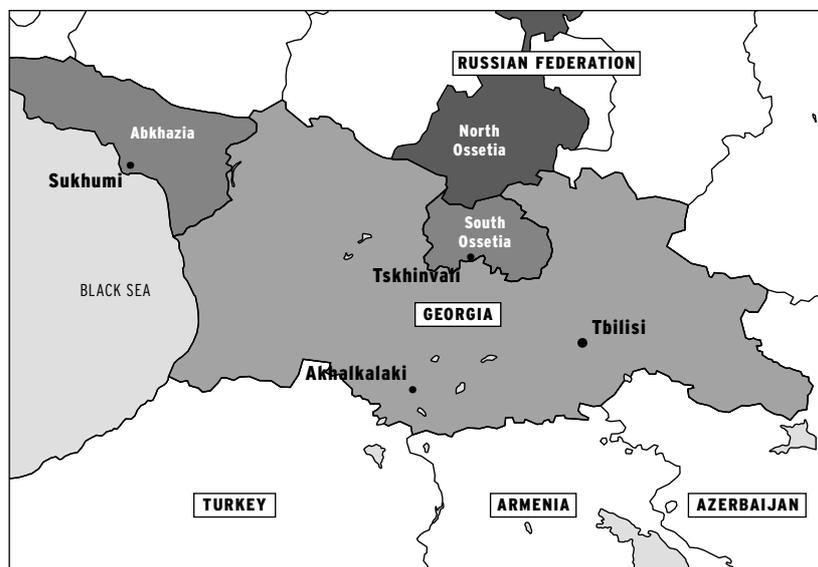
Like many of the wars which accompanied the end of the Cold War, Georgia's conflicts of independence did not consist of a single war but rather a series of overlapping ethnic and political conflicts, including the Georgian civil war, the South Ossetian conflict, and the Abkhaz conflict. These armed conflicts were not the longest or most deadly internal wars of the early 1990s, but they were deeply affected by the uncontrolled proliferation and availability of small arms.

Georgia did not suffer a single war, but a series of overlapping ethnic and political conflicts.

Only now, more than ten years after fighting began, is it possible to appreciate the role that small arms and subsequent collection efforts played in these conflicts. Following an overview of the three Georgian conflicts that occurred during 1989–93, this chapter provides a detailed description of the evolution of small arms availability during the conflict and post-conflict periods. Lastly, it analyses the effects of small arms proliferation, with a specific focus on the demilitarized zone between Georgia and Abkhazia.

During the Georgian conflicts of independence, the availability of small arms changed dramatically. In the early period from 1989 to mid-1991, few small arms were available and the sources of supply were primarily non-military. From mid-1991 onwards, however, public institutions disintegrated, including the Russian armed forces. Small arms suddenly became widely available through massive leakages from Russian military bases and through a thriving regional trade involving Azerbaijan and Armenia, as illustrated by decreasing small arms prices after 1991.

Map 6.1 Republic of Georgia



The increased availability of small arms changed and aggravated conflict in Georgia. The result was that by 1992–93, armed militias had acquired at least 40,000 weapons with which to intensify their struggle, and political conflicts were transformed from low-level social violence into full-scale warfare.

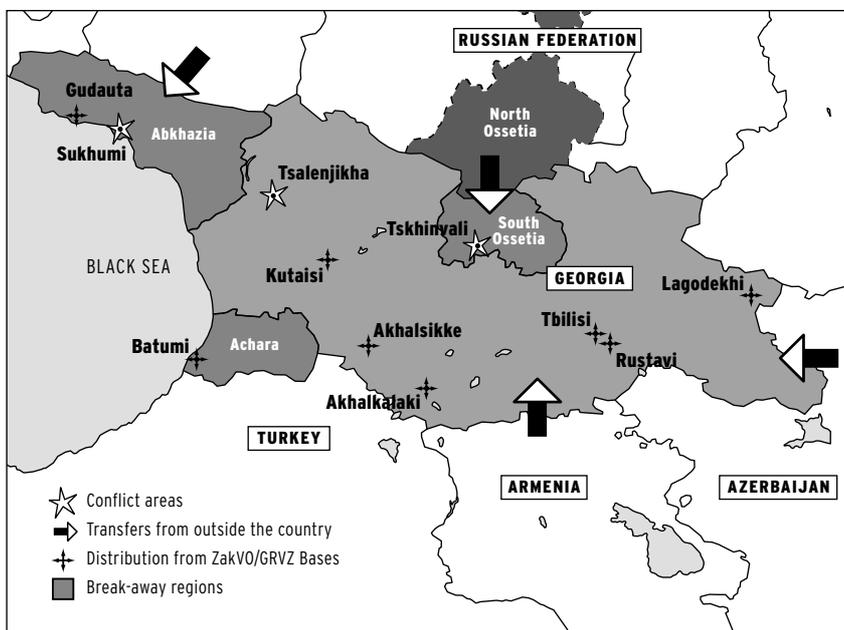
In 1993–95, President Eduard Shevardnadze restored a degree of order in parts of Georgian territory. However, despite numerous attempts to reduce the number of weapons spread throughout the country, little progress was made. Weapons collection made little difference: former combatants and a suspicious public hesitated to participate, offering mostly weapons that were old, obsolete, or inoperable. The greatest contribution of the collection programmes was to build confidence in the political structures of the re-emerging Georgian state. But the fact remains that most of the small arms, the seeds of future fighting, were unaffected and remained in circulation.

The case of Georgia demonstrates clearly how the restoration of political order does not necessarily bring an end to the wide range of direct and indirect effects associated with the widespread proliferation, availability, and misuse of small arms. While increased small arms availability aggravated the Georgian conflicts through the militarization of politics and the primacy of armed groups, the fact that large numbers of small arms remained in the hands of criminal groups in the post-conflict period resulted in a range of humanitarian and development impacts.

These effects were particularly visible in Abkhazia. In the post-conflict period 1993–2001, weapons availability combined with a lack of state structures and widespread poverty facilitated the formation and growth of criminal groups. These have made a minor industry of violent criminal activity, including ambushes, killings, theft, abduction, and hijacking. This legacy has had a dramatic impact on economic activity, especially agricultural production, foreign investment, and even the ability of humanitarian and relief organizations to provide assistance to affected communities.

While weapons collection weakened paramilitary groups, it did not result in the comprehensive disarmament of Georgian society.

Map 6.2 Sources and distribution patterns of weapons within Georgia



The recycling of these weapons for new destabilizing purposes reveals the importance of stockpile management and security for preventing small arms from entering the illicit market, aggravating conflict and undermining the transition to peace. This is a lesson that applies not only to Georgia, but to other post-conflict regions as well.