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A state of near-war lasted for almost two decades between Georgia and the separatist region of Abkhazia. Localized violence plagued neighboring communities while United Nations agencies, humanitarian groups, and religious organizations worked with both sides to resolve the conflict's underlying causes. Unfortunately, those diverse and long-standing efforts proved fruitless when the parties went to war in August 2008. This article examines the reasons for the conflict's enduring nature and presents an example of grassroots peacemaking completed by university students focused on the plight of Georgia's domestic refugees. An in-depth case study reveals the impact of their unilateral peacemaking efforts to present costly signals of benign intent.

Introduction

Local peacemaking plays an important role in conflict resolution. It enables individuals and social groups to move beyond the trauma of violence towards tolerant cohabitation at a minimum, and full reconciliation in the best cases. The problem facing such efforts is the lack of real power to change the structural conditions fostering violence. Limited by scarce resources and few connections between hurting communities, local peacemaking often has little impact on decision makers responsible for officially

ending hostilities. There have been, however, noted exceptions that inspire continued efforts. South Africa's indigenous peace churches, Catholic and Protestant inter-community repentance services in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, truth commissions in Sierra Leone, and Palestinian-Israeli wilderness encounters in the Sinai all give hope that peace is possible, even if only on a small scale. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict offers another potential example of local peacemaking despite the bleak prospects for large-scale conflict resolution.

Prior to the outbreak of open hostilities in 2008, a state of near-war lasted for almost two decades.¹ Local violence plagued neighboring communities while United Nations agencies, humanitarian groups, and religious organizations worked with both sides to resolve the conflict's underlying causes. Unfortunately, those diverse and long-standing efforts proved fruitless when the parties went to war in August 2008. The Summer War appears to have ended Georgia's hopes of recapturing Abkhazia, but it did so without ensuring the conditions necessary for lasting bilateral peace. Instead, official relations will likely remain frozen for the foreseeable future.

This article discusses the reasons for the conflict's enduring nature and the recent war that brought Russia directly into the violence. However, its most significant contribution is to present an example of grassroots peacemaking completed by university students focused on the plight of Georgia's internally displaced persons (IDPs – the official term for refugees living within their own country but not their original communities.) Their story deserves repeating because of the courage, empathy, and self-sacrifice they exhibited in the face of resistance by the Georgian government and longstanding suspicion by the Abkhaz leadership. An in-depth case study reveals the

impact of their unilateral peacemaking efforts to present costly signals of benign intent to the Abkhaz people and government. It also shows the structural limitations of such an approach when the controlling government has ulterior motives contrary to its declarations of peace.

Historical Context

The Abkhaz have sought independence from Georgia for decades. Academics, policymakers, and the antagonists themselves offer numerous reasons for their separatist inclinations, including Soviet legacies of regional autonomy, forced Georgian immigration during the twentieth century, strong ethnic connections to groups in southern Russia, and *de facto* internal sovereignty within Abkhazia itself. Despite the range of explanations though, every Georgian government from the early Soviet period to today has claimed Abkhazia as part of its territory.

Even if it were possible for outside analysis to establish which side is correct, each group's deeply held beliefs would likely remain unchanged, especially so after the events of 2008. However, centuries of ethnic intermarriage, cultural homogenization, and outside control make them far more similar than the separatists claim. The Abkhaz are closely related to groups in Southern Russia, but in many ways can be seen as part of the Georgian cultural community. Each Georgian area has its own unique customs and dialects, but all share the same basic qualities of Orthodox Christianity, common cuisine, and the Georgian language. The Abkhaz have rejected the Georgian language altogether but retain the first two.

The Abkhaz government restored the use of their language after decades of neglect and subservience to Georgian, but its phonetic similarity to Mingrelian gives credence to the view that the Abkhaz belong in the larger Georgian social construction; many regional dialects differ from the others but this patchwork community has existed for centuries as the model of Georgian society. Unfortunately, political decisions during the Soviet period greatly complicated relations within Georgia by emphasizing Abkhaz differences rather than similarities, thereby fueling separatist aspirations and making a difficult situation far worse.

The Bolsheviks initially offered full Republic status to Abkhazia and the border areas of the North Caucasus. For seven years Abkhazia was on par with the other Transcaucasian republics, but Stalin eventually withdrew his support and placed the area firmly under Georgian control. He may have done so out of loyalty to his Georgian heritage, his penchant for creating political confusion as a way to maintain personal control, or simply as one of several territorial reorganizations in the early Soviet period. Whatever the reason, the Georgian Soviet Republic seized the opportunity to eliminate dissent by closing local language schools, forcing mandatory Georgian language instruction, and prosecuting regional leaders for instigating factionalism and treason. The heavy-handed approach left a lasting bitterness and fear of political servitude among the Abkhaz.

The issue of territorial sovereignty might have ended then but the Abkhaz were given a reprieve when Khrushchev authorized the creation of Abkhaz schools, special Abkhaz positions in the Georgian government, and increased funding for social programs in Abkhazia. However, Moscow's imposition of separatist ways soured Georgian views

of Russia and the legitimacy of regional autonomy. A widespread view among many Georgians has been that Moscow actively seeks to divide their country in order to ensure its weakness and compliance. Creating a false state in Abkhazia in the Soviet period, then siding with it during the post-Soviet civil war contributed to a deep mistrust towards the Russian government that the Summer War confirmed.

Antagonistic nationalism increased in both areas during the late Soviet period, and the Abkhaz eventually appealed to Moscow to restore the first Soviet Constitution that had granted them independence. Gorbachev denied the request, but the attempt increased Georgian resentment.² Skirmishes broke out in Abkhaz capital of Sokhumi (Sukhum in Abkhaz), and in 1990 the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared independence from the USSR and Georgia. The Georgian government responded by removing its legislative authority, declaring its own independence from the Soviet Union, and electing a radical nationalist to the presidency. Full-scale war broke out soon after driving close to three hundred thousand Georgians from their homes. Casualties were high on both sides with claims of human rights violations leveled by both governments. Accounts bear a striking resemblance to other regions engulfed by ethnic civil war: mass executions, torture and rape, burning victims alive in their homes, and infanticide. While neither side can claim the moral high ground, the Georgians suffered the added trauma of fleeing their homes *en masse* with little hope of return. This more than the violence itself would define the next two decades of bilateral relations.

Approximately fifty thousand Georgians eventually returned to the Gali border region of Abkhazia, corralled in a buffer zone guarded by Russian peacekeepers. Abkhaz government officials claimed this was an effort to restore Georgian property while

preserving the Abkhaz nature of their country (Interviews June 2007). Squatters were given *carte blanche* to claim abandoned homes, with the stipulation that Georgians with legal claims in the area be given priority over refugees from Abkhazia proper; the latter were seen as illegitimate migrants resulting from Georgian political domination. The ability of the Gali residents to restore normal lives remained limited given the pervasive localized fighting and persistent fears of escalating violence. However, life in Gali was infinitely better during the “decade of conflict resolution” than what followed during the Summer War of 2008.

The intervening years witnessed increasingly hostile cross-border relations between the Georgians and Abkhaz, and their respective international patrons, despite numerous peacemaking efforts at all levels of government and society. The United States and UN Security Council repeatedly asserted the territorial integrity of Georgia to Abkhazia, while Russia used its peacekeeping mandate to pressure the Georgian government into various political and economic concessions. Things got much worse after the 2003 Rose Revolution soured relations across the board. The new Georgian administration pursued closer relations with the United States and began pushing back against Russian influence in the region. Bitter exchanges ranged from the mutual expulsion of diplomatic representatives and trade embargoes, to Georgian claims that Moscow was behind increasingly aggressive domestic opposition rallies.³ Hostile rhetoric ratcheted up threat perceptions on all sides as Georgian media and government sources focused on Russia’s imperialist intentions and the separatists’ illegal pro-independence actions,⁴ while the separatists and Russia blamed Georgian President Saakashvili for radically destabilizing the long-standing peace.⁵

The separatists claimed to be under threat of outside aggression since they maintained purely defensive positions under the 1992 Sochi Agreement that established a Russian supervised cease-fire. There had been small-scale skirmishes around Gali for years but nothing more than the occasional flare-up, and neither the Georgian capture of the Kodori Valley in northern Abkhazia in 2006,⁶ nor growing Russian claims that violence was imminent in early 2008 changed the military *status quo*.⁷ However, the Russian government abandoned the pretense of neutrality and forcefully intervened in both separatist regions once Georgian troops began killing Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia, and the Abkhaz used the opportunity to push the Georgians out of their territory for good.

The war began outside Abkhazia but quickly spread there as Georgian and Russian troops advanced towards the border. Russian troops participating in a counter-terrorism exercise responded in defense of their peacekeepers and entered South Ossetia and Abkhazia to destroy Georgian groups claimed to be undermining the pro-Russian separatist governments.⁸ What followed was “peace coercion” to ensure the Georgian government would never again try to alter the *status quo* in its favor. This led to a full-scale invasion of northern Georgia, driving the Georgians out of their American-financed bases near Zugdidi (the closest town to the Abkhaz border), and maintaining security zones for several weeks to eliminate guerilla activity in the area. Abkhazia was also fortified by sea and land forces through newly repaired roads and railways connecting it to Southern Russia.

However, the Russian offensive into Georgia proper calls into question the view that Moscow’s policy was a) peacekeeping, b) the Right to Protect civilians against

aggression, or c) outside intervention in support of oppressed ethnic groups. It seems clear that breaking the stalemate, reestablishing regional hegemony, and punishing Georgia were the ultimate goals, goals which Moscow completely succeeded in accomplishing. Official recognition of Abkhazia followed soon thereafter.

The separatists clearly benefited from Russia's military intervention and diplomatic strong-arming, but the long-term effects remain unclear.⁹ While the lack of broad international support has not slowed Russian efforts to build up the separatists' internal security forces or Abkhaz appeals for full recognition by other countries, the area is no closer to becoming a viable independent state than before the Summer War. In addition, its new Russian-sponsored status has not encouraged Georgian IDP repatriation, one of the most contentious and heart-wrenching problems facing thousands of the war's victims. Russian security guarantees to protect all sides ring hollow after its military actions, and a climate of fear, intimidation, and mutual animosity remains widespread and deeply entrenched.

The new balance of power is a *fait accompli*, wherever blame ultimately lies, and political relations have been fundamentally altered. However, there are still stories to be told, stories of courage and sacrifice in the face of overwhelming opposition which can offer hope to hurting individuals and broken communities elsewhere. The following sections examine one such effort, an eleventh-hour unilateral attempt to bring reconciliation several months before the war's occurrence.

Unilateral Initiatives and Empathy

Reconciliation often requires both parties to engage in admission of guilt and forgiveness.¹⁰ Beginning the process need not require mutual effort though; it is also possible for one side to express contrition and a willingness to repair the broken relationship. The type of response usually determines the pace of peacemaking, and may even derail the entire process if some form of reciprocity is not given. However despite its limitations, unilateral initiatives remain an important part of the conflict resolution toolkit.

Boyle and Lawler (1991) build on existing theories of Graduated Reciprocation in Tension-reduction (GRIT) and Tit for Tat to show that unilateral initiatives reduce threat perceptions more effectively than does a strategy of strict reciprocity. The challenge for such efforts is to express benign intent without appearing to be weak and vulnerable. They suggest small, symbolic gestures that do not degrade an actor's fundamental security, but are large enough to illustrate the gravity of the issue at hand and a degree of risk for the initiator. Motivations for such signals of benign intent come from either trust in the good nature of the Other (either through *bona fides* provided by a trusted outsider or through learning-to-trust activities fostered by GRIT, Tit-for-Tat, or similar strategies) or from a defensive mindset.¹¹ Aggressive actors reduce their ability to win if they give up something fundamental to offensive strategies; defensively minded actors do not need offensive power assets and do not reduce their security by eschewing them.

The success of such unilateral initiatives often depends on existing balances of power between antagonists (Lawler 1999). Disparate power relations create barriers to accurate perceptions of intent, with both sides feeling their present vulnerabilities or

fearing being perceived as weak in the future. Therefore, signs of benign intent are most credible between equally powerful actors; slightly less effective are concessions made by the weaker side. In contrast, concessions by the stronger party embolden the weaker side to advance its demands based on perceptions of weakness in the stronger. This leads to heightened threat perceptions by the stronger and a retreat from reconciliation.¹²

The constraints of playing a two-level political game make these perceptions even more challenging for decision-makers as domestic regime constraints affect the range of negotiation win-sets. This is especially true for democracies since election promises capture elites and limit their ability to operate with impunity in the international arena.¹³ Increasing the size of one's win-set at the negotiating table signals flexibility, and potentially increases the chances of reaching a compromise, but the electorate may perceive it as less representative and punish elites in the next election. Nationalist rhetoric used during campaigns places even more severe restrictions on negotiators because it ties issues to indivisible identities of nation, culture, and ethnicity (Wiegand 2002). Backing away from such rhetoric risks alienating domestic supporters and reducing bargaining credibility, thereby decreasing available compromises.

Large (1999) shows one possible solution to the problem, arguing that signals about peripheral issues are more easily perceived as non-threatening and less likely to be seen as signs of weakness. By avoiding contentious central issues, these signals do not activate "knee-jerk" rejection responses by international negotiators or domestic groups. Relatively high costs to the giver also increase the successful perception and reception by the receiver. Trust builds as the receiver sees the gift as a meaningful sacrifice by the giver, more so than because of any perceived benefit he or she might receive personally.

Thyne (2006) labels these efforts as “cheap” signals, distinguishing them from traditional costly signals made in alliance commitments, military deployments, sanctions and other material sacrifices. However, “cheap” does not mean they are valueless since they signal a degree of risk taking in the cause of conflict resolution.

Cheap signals can include speeches by elite decision-makers, ambassadorial changes, media interviews, and statements of intent by low-level government bureaucrats. Thyne examines the timing and intensity of such signals to government and opposition groups poised on the edge of civil war, and shows that enduring cheap signals of support for governments have the greatest impact in deterring civil war. However, the reception of any cheap signal largely depends on the place of empathy between antagonists.

Keller and Yang (2009) discuss the centrality of empathy in elite decision making as part of a two-stage process, arguing that empathy during the first stage – narrowing possible choices – leads to the greatest chance of conciliation; empathy during the later implementation stage helps as well but less by comparison. They include several factors that shape empathy including personal experiences with the Other before the crisis, the presence of multiple channels to contact the Other, and the Other’s familiarity with Self.¹⁴

Empathy can be defined generally as the ability to see situations from another’s perspective. “Walking in another person’s shoes” gives new insights into how the Other perceives him/herself and other people. However, getting to that place is a persistent challenge for conflict resolution theorists, practitioners and the antagonists themselves. Komorita et al. (1992) argue that Tit for Tat can be an effective strategy if participants

are taught to trust the rules. Feeling safe enough to do that is a difficult, but necessary condition. However, creating space for empathy training can be frustrated easily since weaker groups tend to favor changing the *status quo*, while participants from the stronger side try to build new relationships within the current system (Dessel et al. 2006). Opatow et al. (2005) describes this problem as one of moral exclusion by rival groups, arguing for more inclusive identity development within and between antagonists through fairness education exercises, resource sharing, and personal investment in the process of peace by respected community leaders.

Rossi (2003) proposes a teaching model that can be used in these situations, either across antagonist groups or in single-identity work, as participants discuss their past experiences and recognize their common future.¹⁵ He suggests some kind of catharsis is necessary to start the process of building empathy, usually personal or group trauma, psychological distress, or trust in a respected leader's guidance, many of which were evidenced in the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict resolution context. The process gains momentum over time and reaches a tipping point when empathy becomes the new norm and the common motivation to make peace.¹⁶

Rossi's practical curriculum requires practitioners first to build the participants' interest in the issues and determine the rules for communication. Role-playing then forms the basis of empathy training with extensive time for learning about the Other through personal information sharing and research. Individuals are encouraged to take their roles seriously and identify beneficial and harmful forces shaping their interest fulfillment. Instructors let participants interact within broad parameters, reminding them that the goal is not to reach a settlement *per se*, rather to gain mutual understanding.

Peace circles are another effective, though less didactic way to build empathy. Based on the principles of interconnectedness, equality, and diversity, peace circles follow several prescribed stages (Boyes-Watson 2005). Opening ceremonies set the tone and the “process keeper” explains the guidelines. Participants then pass a talking piece around the circle with each person taking turns to speak. This gives people time to consider their words, while drawing shy people into the discussion and preventing any single member or subgroup from dominating the conversation. Participants discuss their expectations, decide on the definitions of key words, and share their views. The circle then closes with another meaning-laden ritual to reinforce empathy and understanding.

These approaches work best at the grassroots level and can be used in either single-identity or inter-community settings. They also have a legitimate place in broader conflict resolution efforts despite their structural limitations influencing policy making. Evans-Kent (2002) rightly criticizes international peacemaking efforts that overlook local factors and rely exclusively on elite decision-makers. Such approaches ignore the role local grievances have in fomenting violence that often spreads to neighboring communities. She also criticizes exclusively elite-driven approaches that reframe issues which were once malleable and suitable for conciliation into highly politicized and inflexible positions. Using the Dayton Peace Accords as an example of an imposed/non-local peace, Evans-Kent shows that ethnic identities hardened despite the decline in violence, creating stereotypes and reinforcing fear of traveling to neighboring “foreign” areas; better integration across multiple diplomatic tracks could have prevented the growth of latent hostilities while stopping the overt violence. NGOs helped overcome some of these problems afterward by focusing on empathy building in several villages.

School programs to teach children values shared by their former enemies, microfinancing for small businesses, and job training for unemployed men were all successful in reducing hostilities between neighbors and across ethnic lines.

Kelleher and Johnson (2008) present similar success stories of religious groups in Sudan and Northern Ireland. Local workers had a high level of cultural understanding since many were members of the antagonist communities and had suffered through the violence themselves. In addition, international groups had proven expertise in conflict resolution methods used in other areas, and local leaders gave legitimacy to the activists because they committed to stay until life improved for the locals. All of these attributes facilitated peacemaking at the local level even when structural violence and injustice remained unchanged.¹⁷ In addition, many programs were started unilaterally. One group bravely faced their enemies armed only with goodwill and peace, knowing that their signals could be misinterpreted, or worse, taken advantage of by the other side. A similar project occurred in the months preceding the Summer War.

Letters of Intent

I traveled to Georgia in 2007 on a Fulbright Scholarship to apply multi-track conflict resolution strategies between Georgia and Abkhazia. One approach was to engage government officials in Tbilisi and Sokhumi, working with existing ministries and international organizations to create new avenues of communication. I met with several members of the Georgian Ministry for Conflict Resolution staff, including then-Deputy Minister Davit Bakradze, to discuss current efforts and future possibilities. The US Embassy facilitated the meetings and most resulted in broad support for grassroots

efforts. I had not yet formulated a specific program for my students,¹⁸ but the overall government view was supportive of cross-cultural communication, as were the views expressed by the Abkhaz Foreign Ministry; Deputy Minister Maxim Gunjia was particularly helpful.

One original approach began with local Orthodox priests to increase their peacemaking efforts among refugee communities in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Zugdidi (the three cities with the largest IDP populations). The Patriarchate supported a host of suggested plans, including a peace march to the Russian checkpoint at the Inguri River separating the antagonists. Unfortunately, even though priests were highly effective at conflict resolution in their communities, Track Two projects to build peace with the Abkhaz proved unsuccessful (Meredith 2008-2009).

The final component of my research was a grassroots letter writing project developed with students at Tbilisi State University and International Black Sea University, during which time I applied many of the theoretical and practical guidelines mentioned in the above literature review. Our first meetings began with a combination of didactic and interactive learning. Students introduced themselves and told if they were natives of Tbilisi; roughly one third were IDPs from Abkhazia. Ground rules for the semester established how topics would be discussed and the format for questioning each other's statements. The goal was to build a safe, honest environment where students could express their deeply held views about the Georgian government, their plight, the Abkhaz, and international actors trying to assist them.

The students were initially reserved during the first few classes, with only a handful speaking out. The main reason was their unfamiliarity with discussion as a form

of instruction; most of their formal education had been in lectures and they were not yet comfortable speaking in public. Language barriers were quickly overcome though, as students with better English language facilities translated for those with limited abilities, and after three weeks, almost everyone spoke every class period. The courses then moved into the research and analysis stage.

Each student was asked to write down the main actors in the conflict with Abkhazia, then rank them in terms of responsibility for the violence. They blamed the Abkhaz as a whole, followed by the Russian, US, and Georgian governments. The results were read aloud to the class and discussion of the rankings brought further classifications: the Abkhaz people held less responsibility than their government, the Russian government expanded to include the Russian people in general, and the US and Georgian governments remained unchanged. The process of exonerating the Abkhaz people while blaming the Russians was an unexpected result, one that led to increased empathy once the letter project took shape.

Over the next two weeks, classes broke into smaller groups of four or five students to define national interests for each government involved. They concluded that Georgian interests were to maintain its territorial integrity, return all IDPs to their homes (or Abkhaz homes if theirs were no longer available), and if necessary, use military force to reassert national pride. Abkhaz interests varied from independence, a medium position of *de facto* autonomy with Russian protection (the *status quo* position) or directly joining Russia. They described Russia as imperialistic bent on keeping Georgia weak and driven by strategic interests to gain Abkhazia's Black Sea ports, or worse, determined to recapture Georgia itself. The United States was seen as using Georgia to annoy the

Russians, but unwilling to commit fully to its defense in the likely event of Russian aggression.

The students then conducted research for the next few weeks. They read Western and Russian media sources to compare with their perceptions; some changed in degree but the overall tone remained the same. The next stage involved teaching conflict resolution strategies. Several lectures dealt with the different diplomatic tracks, specifically assessing the value and likely success of each in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Few students had hope for inter-governmental relations, although they believed people-to-people contact still held promise; nearly half had taken part in NGO-sponsored encounters with Abkhaz students. Despite those experiences, the biggest challenge was overcoming their apathy and anger after nearly two decades of failed negotiations and broken promises by the international community and their own government.

Weeks passed with heated discussions, harsh words, and even tears. Over time the hard-line Georgian nationalists began to see the need to compromise, and the apathetic renewed their hope for change. Their perspectives represented many in the larger community, and the movement towards reconciliation encouraged bolder steps. The topic of costly signaling came up for discussion midway through the semester, and the students learned about threat perceptions and how to show benign intent through role playing and connecting the concepts to their personal lives. Dating, friendships, and family relationships served as templates for extrapolation to relations with the Abkhaz.¹⁹ Empathy began to develop as students saw their struggles for identity in a post-conflict country, broad economic hardships resulting from international relations beyond their control, and the need to forgive as equally valid for the Abkhaz as for themselves.

Orthodox Christianity played a significant role for many of the students reaching that tipping point, and even more importantly, the movement toward forgiveness.²⁰ By this time sufficient trust had been established between the students and with me as their leader in peacemaking. We began to discuss the church's teaching on peaceful relations, and their responsibilities to sacrifice and live humbly as Christians. Statements by several well-known local priests laid the groundwork justifying what became the letter project.

The critical discussion came one month before my scholarship ended. I asked the students what it would look like for them to offer peace to the Abkhaz: would they have to humiliate themselves or could peace also come through strength. I challenged them to set aside the traditional methods they had learned or witnessed over the past fifteen years and to be creative. A female student named Natia spoke up, saying that she had come to realize peacemaking required a radical shift in tactics, but that real strength came from sacrifice not violence. She referenced the American civil rights movement and the peaceful demonstrations in Georgia and Ukraine that brought about political change. She committed herself to doing whatever she could to make peace, even if that meant giving up her notions of Georgian statehood; what mattered to her was helping the victims of the war, not preserving her national pride. The power of her words was made stronger by her previous position against any compromise on territorial integrity. While Natia was not a norm entrepreneur creating a new way to interact with her enemies, she served as a catalyst for other students to express empathy and a desire for forgiveness. That class discussion produced a plan to write letters on behalf of the thousands of IDPs wanting to return home.

The letters had a simple message translated into four languages. They stated “Please, let me come home” in Russian, Abkhaz, Georgian and English. We spent much time debating the message and meaning of those words. Some feared they would seem weak in the eyes of their enemies. Others thought the letters would be taken by the Abkhaz government and never shown to the Abkhaz people, the real target of the project. Still others wanted a more aggressive tone that asserted Georgian rights and called on the Abkhaz to do the “right” thing and rejoin Georgia. In the end, the words recorded in the Christian Gospels, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” convinced the hold-outs to proceed with the more humble message (Matthew 5:9-10). One student added the next Beatitude as further reason to put their lives on the line for the sake of peace, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The front side of the letters contained the four-language message and space for a signature. The reverse side had a poem written by the students. It expressed their pain from the past violence, and their present isolation from historical homelands; their fears that nothing would improve and the conflict would drag on indefinitely; a growing hope that the Abkhaz people were just like them – tired of war and wanting to be reunited; and finally, a willingness to change their perceptions and believe the best about former enemies. Written in Georgian, the English translation is as follows.

We are peacemakers. We are people of the Caucasus.

We grieve for the pain of all our pasts. We hope for the promise of all our futures.

We are men and women, sons and daughters. We remember, but we do not hate.

We have suffered loss, but we long for reconciliation.

We have seen horrors in war, but we hold onto hope in peace.

We have tasted death, but we want to breathe life.

We are a proud people, but we are not enemies.

We want justice, but we offer mercy.

We belong to the land, but the land does not belong to us.

We are the future, but we must live it together.

We are peacemakers. We are people of the Caucasus.

The choice of Georgian was primarily for the people who would be asked to sign the letters, the thousands of IDPs living in despair and poverty throughout Georgia.

We made roughly five thousand letters to be signed in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Zugdidi. Students spoke to their families and neighbors, school friends and work colleagues. They visited elderly pensioners, parents, unemployed day laborers, and anyone else they knew. They made new connections and expanded their circle of influence until all the letters were signed. Almost every person they spoke with signed a letter, but few conversations were easy. The students showed what they had learned and internalized about conflict resolution, sometimes spending hours talking with people. Individuals would invite relatives and neighbors to hear what they were doing, and heated discussions often developed, but the students held firmly to their convictions and convinced many to join the project. Daily debriefing sessions allowed the students to share their successes as well as struggles, and advice filtered through the groups. My role became one of encouragement rather than instruction.

We made plans to deliver them at the border once all the letters had been collected. The students would go to the center of the Inguri bridge separating the conflict

zones and deliver the letters to the Abkhaz and Russian soldiers stationed nearby. Some had been there before for peace demonstrations, and locals regularly crossed the border to buy produce and visit relatives. My own experiences at the border crossing had always been uncomplicated, and a local television news crew agreed to cover the event and broadcast it throughout the country.

The students chose ten representatives to take the letters, three of whom had previously been their staunchest opponents (Natia was one of them). Traveling by overnight train, they arrived tired but excited to see the fruit of their labors. However, our plans began to unravel once we reached the Georgian checkpoint.

Word of the project had spread to Members of Parliament through several professors at the universities, and officials waited for our arrival and confiscated the letters. This was a complete surprise to me as I had spoken with the Chair of the Department of Conflict Resolution at Tbilisi State University about the project weeks before our trip.

Border personnel refused to allow anyone past, claiming the letters would incite violence from the Abkhaz. I tried to show that the letters were signs of goodwill, and that as humble, self-constraining messages of peace they would not be construed as aggressive. While I had no idea what the soldiers would do with the letters afterwards, I assured the Georgian officials that the message would benefit the government's stated position of conflict resolution. I mentioned my conversations with the Abkhaz Foreign Ministry, but this only aggravated them more and precipitated the arrival of the regional security commander for northern Georgia. He too was unmoved by theoretical reasoning, examples of similar efforts in other conflict areas, and even several students' open

weeping. The boxes remained behind the Georgian border and our peacemaking efforts looked to be at an end.

However, the students decided on one final gamble: I would hide a handful of letters in my shirt and deliver them myself; the television crew would not be able to accompany me, but they interviewed the students and promised to run the story later that day. I had been in Abkhazia before but the Georgian officials tried to stop me from going again. Dire warnings aside, my American passport ensured my trip across the bridge one more time. I delivered the letters as planned and spent several tense hours being interrogated by Abkhaz intelligence officers sent from the capital, only escaping a trip to Sokhumi because of the friendship I had struck up with the local soldiers.

None of us heard any more about the letters, whether the ones confiscated at the border or those delivered to the Abkhaz. I had told Abkhaz Deputy Foreign Minister Gunjia about the project weeks earlier and I hope they reached him. Whatever their fate though, one year later Georgia and Abkhazia were at war and the chances for cross-community peacemaking disappeared for good.

Conclusion

What lessons can be learned from the letter project and can any principles be generalized to other conflict areas? Despite its failure to change the course of events in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, this grassroots effort made three valuable contributions to the practice of conflict resolution. First, unilateral initiatives can change the giver even if the receiver remains unmoved. Very few students initially supported reconciliation and forgiveness, and several hated the Abkhaz outright. All of them moved towards

peacemaking in the process and committed to carrying on the effort despite the results at the Inguri bridge.

Initial meetings with participants had two key aspects that made this progress possible, but may not always be available in other contexts: 1) the participants were students and 2) they had an existing knowledge base for evaluating political decision-making. The first aspect established a hierarchy between me and the students, one that was initially deferential and allowed for easier teaching than if they had been adult volunteers with low exit costs. The students had committed to their Georgian professors to listen respectfully and try to keep open minds. Their willingness to move beyond cognitive dissonance and embrace new ideas was extremely important to building trust early in the project. Equally important was the legitimacy I received from the other professors; cross-cultural education works best when resident teachers welcome outsiders as equals and require that students respect them as native instructors.

In addition, the students' previous studies in political science and conflict methodology allowed us to move beyond rudimentary lessons to more complicated tasks of analysis and application. This enabled the students to become agents for change in their communities once they became convinced of the project's merits. However, unilateral initiatives at the grassroots level take time to diffuse throughout society, sometimes taking years to overcome resistance within local groups. Norm entrepreneurs are also critically important in the process. Their presence as respected community leaders gives them access to critical social network connections enabling them to influence widely dispersed members. South Africa, Northern Ireland, Mozambique and Sierra Leone left behind decades of violence through the efforts of social leaders

committed to the cause of peace and the thousands of individuals working alongside them in their local communities. Local Orthodox priests played that role in the letter project.

Unfortunately the students and priests ran out of time when war broke out one year later.

The second lesson shows that despite the changes in people's thinking, education was not enough to move all the students down the path of peacemaking. While not exclusive to the process, religion played a key part as Christian teachings offered by the students and supported by local priests repositioned religion in their understanding of the conflict. The most pervasive use of religion in the country has been to connect Orthodox Christianity with nationalist political agendas. Utilizing the existing connection between religious and ethnic identities to revise political goals occurred at several levels of the project, but its most important location was between the students themselves. Over time my role became more similar to a "process keeper" in peace circles than the traditional professor most students had encountered before. Engaging them in personal ways helped to internalize the material, but their interactions with each other carried the greatest weight, and interactions with other Georgians outside the classroom revealed the extent of their personal transformations.

Finally, the unfortunate results at the Ingui bridge show that grassroots peacemaking needs the support of government officials to bring about cross-community interactions, to say nothing of reconciliation. Despite initial offers of support and tacit approval, the Georgian government resisted most efforts conducted outside their stagnant, unproductive approaches. I spoke with many long-term peacemakers at all levels of conflict resolution, and their views rang through with frustration at the hypocrisy of official peace efforts. The government's unwillingness to engage original solutions

outside its control could have resulted from the interplay of complex domestic challenges, specifically the rising opposition against Saakashvili's administration and his stated policy of territorial integration. It may also have resulted from a lack of empathy for the Abkhaz. More troubling would have been a hidden agenda to cast off the guise of conflict resolution and affect the balance of power militarily, in which case we simply got in the way. Or perhaps it was a parochial mentality that was reluctant to welcome new actors into the process. In either case, the result brought the country closer to its deadly showdown with Russia the following year, and every attempt to build new bridges with the Abkhaz failed.

However, hope for unilateral peacemaking remains because suffering people gained a measure of comfort through the project, and many built new connections and meaningful relationships based on the shared goal of peace. The future may look bleak for Georgian territorial integrity, but every student expressed their desire to help those around them forgive and move on with their lives. In the end, that was all one could hope to achieve.

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Notes

¹ This article focuses on the Abkhaz component of Georgia's civil war, leaving the South Ossetian question for later analysis. The two separatist causes share many similarities, but the goal here is to tell the story of a peacemaking effort directed specifically at the Abkhaz.

² Georgians usually describe the Abkhaz as opportunists and Russian puppets. More severe descriptions include Stalinists, terrorists, and even animals and savages. There is broad acceptance of these views in the government, academia, and society at large. The Abkhaz have similar names for the Georgians. Soldiers at the border with Georgia shared deep hatred for their neighbors and the United States for supporting them. Bank tellers in the Abkhaz capital of Sokhumi had almost visceral reactions when they saw Georgian currency, refusing even to touch it (Interviews March-June 2007).

³ The November 2007 opposition demonstrations revealed a growing weakness in the government's monolithic control. How far that weakness would have extended in the absence of outright war with Russia seems less certain. George and Stefes (2008) make a convincing case that Saakashvilli could have weathered the storm without fundamentally damaging Georgia's democratic consolidation.

⁴ Russian actions in 2007, specifically shooting down Georgian unmanned aerial vehicles and a helicopter attack on Georgian positions in the Kodori Valley, had taken relations in a decidedly negative direction, but

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the real change occurred when Russia opened official relations with the separatists in April 2008. This step, with greater diplomatic significance than the previous issuance of Russian passports to locals, signaled a major shift from tacit approval to outright recognition.

⁵ President Saakashvili changed the title of the previous Ministry of Conflict Resolution to the more assertive Ministry of Territorial Integration. While such an action escalated the hostile rhetoric, it was by no means the catalyst for the war; it can be explained either as playing to nationalist sentiment in the face of growing domestic opposition,⁵ or simply as fulfillment of a campaign promise to restore Georgia's long-lost territory. In either case, renaming the ministry did not violate the international agreements governing relations between the parties, and the Georgian government even offered full autonomy to the separatists in early 2008, granting them a wide range of political and economic rights in a renewed Georgia. Such a compromise represented a major step towards reconciliation, but the separatists rejected all proposals that included territorial reintegration.

⁶ Georgian paramilitary forces advanced out of the Gali region and established a base of operations in Kodori. From that position, the Georgian Government of Abkhazia in Exile met and issued proclamations. Their position was always precarious and proved indefensible during the Summer War. (Interviews May, 2007 with members of the Government in Exile)

⁷ Regardless of their ulterior motives, Russian military commanders claimed an attack into Abkhazia would come in the immediate future (Vignansky 2006; http://www.russiatoday.ru/Top_News/2008-04-17/Build-up_of_Georgian_troops_on_Abkhazia_border_causes_concern.html; *RIA Novosti* 8 August, 2008).

Saakashvili countered that the Russians and Abkhaz were preparing a breakout across the Inguri River, the main border crossing between Abkhazia and Georgia (*L'Express* 1 September 2008).

⁸ Accounts differ as to which side actually started the fighting in South Ossetia, with the Russians claiming the Georgian army began shelling Ossetian villages in the early hours of August 8th, while the Georgians counter that Russia invaded their sovereign territory and theirs was only a response to aggression (Pladysheva 2008; Dulkan 2008). This article does not focus specifically on the causes of the war, rather seeing them as the part of the larger context of fear, violence, and bitterness between the Abkhaz and Georgian people. See "Restoring Georgian Sovereignty, Redux," *Foreign Policy Journal*, August, 2009 for

more details on the war's causes.

⁹ This is the subject of a forthcoming article on quasi-statehood and international aid as rents.

¹⁰ See Theissen (2004) for an excellent review of the roles various conflict resolution actors play in transforming conflict mentalities at the systemic, national, and local levels. Accordingly, the basic premise that reconciliation requires some measure of honest confession and forgiveness is born out through empirical evidence in numerous cases, the most noted being South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. While this statement does not preclude other options for reaching reconciliation, it does assert the broad value of confession and forgiveness in peacemaking.

¹¹ Mitchell (2005) offers a solid treatment of steps and obstacles involved in choosing to take the risk of signaling benign intent, specifically the need to interpret signals accurately and how third-party practitioners can provide valuable information for those perceptions.

¹² A fundamental problem is determining the relative strength of the parties and who makes the decision. Perceptions of one's own capabilities can be as mistaken as those made about the Other (Francis, 2004).

¹³ The same can be said for full-fledged democracies or pseudo-democracies that maintain the façade of democratic ideals but whose use of power and its concentration remain outside the electorate's control. See Diamond (2002) and Lynch (2005) for classifications on regime types and examples of each.

¹⁴ These were especially important during the early 1990's since many Abkhaz and Georgian elites had worked together during the Soviet period. The first civil war shaped those interactions, usually in negative ways, but cooperation increased over time under the Shevardnadze government. However, the 2003 Rose Revolution brought new characters to the Georgian side which made *a priori* empathy less likely. The challenge for the Abkhaz was deciphering Saakashvili's intentions: he offered broad autonomy to the formerly separatist region of Ajaria but was more ambiguous about how he intended to deal with Abkhazia.

¹⁵ Self-selection for participation need not bias the results; Rossi looks at people who are trying to make peace, but need help getting there.

¹⁶ Tipping points are notoriously difficult to define *a priori*, but this article does not seek to predict their occurrence, instead showing when they occurred in the letter project described later.

¹⁷ Kelleher and Johnson do not discuss the reasons local peace correlated to national peace in Northern

Ireland but had limited impact on Sudan's government. It is sufficient for this article to focus on the grassroots effects.

¹⁸ There were several UN and NGO programs already in place (with a long history of student-student interactions), and my goal was not to duplicate successful programs, rather to find new avenues for communication and cooperation.

¹⁹ While not a perfect match to cross-community conflict, the easy application of basic principles to their lives allowed them to appreciate more complex measures in larger contexts.

²⁰ Religion was by no means sufficient in this process, but its necessary role was very clear to me throughout my time there.