

GEORGIA

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RICHARD L. STOCKMAN Communications Officer Tbilisi (1992)

Richard Stockman was born in 1940 in Kansas City, Missouri. He went to seminary at Cape Girardeau in Missouri, and was then drafted into the U.S. Army in 1963, where he spent most of his tour in Germany. Mr. Stockman entered the Foreign Service in 1966 as a communications specialist. He served in Brazil, Honduras, Singapore, Togo, Switzerland, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Canada, and the Soviet Union. Mr. Stockman was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1993.

Q: So we are talking around October, 1992. You went into some detail about how things were in Tashkent, what was different in Tbilisi?

STOCKMAN: I think just about everything was different in Tbilisi in a sense that Tashkent seemed to be a template of Moscow in many respects, whereas Georgia was very much Georgian, not only in the topography, the weather, but I think more importantly in the people, their independent nature. As we know right now the armed conflict has really not settled down. No thanks to the Russians taking sides surprisingly in a kind of unappreciative way towards Shevardnadze, but I guess maybe that is predictable too. It was basically from the very start a much different trip. The simple logistics of getting into Tbilisi, which is a very poverty stricken country today, with, I think, very limited resources. Almost the entire infrastructure of the country seems to be coming to a grinding halt.

Transportation, for example. We had to wait in Vienna, Austria because the plane was delayed twelve hours. It is a very unique arrangement that the Austrians have with the government of Georgia to ferry people back and forth. Due to the severe lack of fuel of all kinds for both heating and transportation, but particularly transportation, flights in and out of Tbilisi are limited to once a week, on Saturdays, or at least they were at that time. I doubt that things have improved a year later. At any rate the Austrians had built two marvelous four star hotels, one in Tbilisi, Georgia and the other one up in the Caucasus Mountains. They seem to have a monopoly on the tourist industry there, what little there is. Basically they would be catering to rich

Europeans and other Westerners who ski and want to get away to a unique romantic type of place. At any rate they also have locked into this hotel arrangement, one charter flight a week, which is a small Aeroflot type plane which carries both cargo and people once a week on Saturdays. That is how we managed to get in there in October.

In the course of that two and a half months of TDY there it was very interesting. By the contrast the Georgian people are very lively. They are well known for their dancing, their culture, their songs, their history and likewise their food, at least in the times when it was plentiful. They are marvelous entertainers. They will offer 50 toasts a night at any Georgian table to which one would be invited. And yet, it is very sad to be there because you can see the strong, horrible evidence of a civil war that took place right in the heart of Tbilisi where very selectively key government buildings were literally destroyed in the civil war which took place I believe December, January, February of say late 1991, early 1992. Consequently it is almost a miracle that anything of any real importance was left in tact and that Shevardnadze could still run a government. But apparently they did have new parliamentary elections some time in early or mid 1992. His fledgling government was trying to hang on when I arrived there in October, November and December. Consequently what one was able to do in terms of getting a real look at the country was somewhat limited and by that I mean primarily because of very high risk security factors. Travel was or should have been restricted to daylight hours only. At night it was not uncommon to hear gunfire randomly all night long on and off throughout the city and therefore unnecessary travel was completely discouraged. All of us were housed in the four star hotel there at the time for lack of housing, with, I think, two exceptions. Two of the single female officers had found accommodations that were, I guess, adequate. But at any rate the city at night was extremely dark and dangerous and we were pretty much confined to the hotel. We did have a satellite dish on the balcony of my room, which we used for emergency communications after hours. There were numerous military flights, humanitarian assistance in a project called Project Hope, and the third or fourth flight was taking place during the time I was there.

But to answer your question, this would be somewhat of an explanation of the contrast between the two places.

Q: Could you explain the state of relations between Georgia and the United States? What were you doing and how were things working out?

STOCKMAN: Well, I think the relationship between the two governments, in light of recent past history with Shevardnadze, were probably as excellent as one could expect. Certainly I would imagine that we were doing everything possible to support him and to try and convince the people that this was a beginning, one in which we were quite interested and of course we were doing everything that could be done, piecemeal fashion, to begin to put things together.

One thing I noticed taking place there that I suppose has also happened in other countries out here, is that there was a team of international jurists there at the time. Apparently they were working together with the new government trying to give them some idea of how to start writing a new constitution. That would really be the first real fundamental legal step in establishing, I suppose, a new democracy that they were not accustomed to.

Q: *For the historian later, what was the civil war about?*

STOCKMAN: What little that I could piece together, apparently there were many, not unlike other CIS countries, many ethnic groups who, over perhaps decades and decades had their axes to grind. Perhaps family feuds, turf battles, political battles of whatever sort. I suppose if one uses a little imagination, and perhaps even reads Fitzroy McLean, a British diplomat's book, Eastern Approaches you could get a real feel for what Joseph Stalin did and the repercussions many years later. His mass deportation of ethnic groups to opposite ends of the Soviet Union obviously had its accumulative effect, in my opinion. I believe we are starting to see reaction to this purging, or ethnic cleansing or whatever you might call it.

Then the fact that he who was in power in the old system had all the perks. And those who were in power didn't want to leave it because it would probably mean a lost of an apartment, a car and all the things that went along with it. So there is a classless society in today's new democracy starting to show what power struggles really mean.

Q: *Dick, how were we setting up our embassy at that time?*

STOCKMAN: Well the embassy there in Tbilisi was certainly a very unique setup. The government had apparently pointed out one building in the early days and designated it as the most suitable for the US embassy. Apparently that was it, there were not many alternative choices. It was a very old, classical building. The very architecture of the building, quite honestly, did not make it very functional for diplomatic purposes. The ceilings were perhaps 20 feet high and it would be very difficult functionally to use all that space effectively, let alone to heat it in the wintertime, which we found out very quickly. The electrical wiring in the building was dilapidated. And yet you could see obvious signs that this was the equivalent of some ministry building with very ornate woodwork and doors, the high ceilings, the tapestry, expensive and old oil paintings in various places throughout the building. In some locations there were fireplaces. So with a little imagination you could just about picture the old establishment, perhaps even the last days of the Tsar, living the life of Riley. And, of course, that came to a quick end.

Q: *Who was our Ambassador while you were there?*

STOCKMAN: Kent Brown.

Q: *Was he an experienced Soviet hand?*

STOCKMAN: Well, I understand that most all of these Ambassadors at one time or another were very experienced Soviet hands. I did not know any of them personally not having served in the Soviet Union or behind the Iron Curtain. But I would certainly say he and his wife were probably two of the most charming people and in my opinion expertly chosen to be ambassador and leaders for a new embassy. They were really, really appreciated by all the embassy staff. And the team loyalty that they had generated was showing obvious results there. Because it is a

difficult post in many respects to work in and yet the morale seemed very, very high for obvious reasons, they had very strong leadership.

Q: *How was it communications wise?*

STOCKMAN: The com set up was pretty much the same as it is in all of these embassies. It was effective. The Achilles heel to all of it, of course, is the city power that we rely upon...most of these embassies that don't have real true generators that we need for emergencies, during power failures in the city... for all practical purposes the telephone installation there and the communications gear was very effective. Thank god.

Q: *Well, you were there for how long?*

STOCKMAN: Two and a half months.

Q: *Was there any consideration because of the fighting that they might close it down again?*

STOCKMAN: At that point in time I don't think there was any such consideration. There was not actually out right civil war in the city during the time I was there. There were factions, of course, that were doing their thing at nighttime, primarily gun running and smuggling I suppose of all kinds. Of course the lack of fuel kept that to a minimum too. The real true fighting was up in the one corner of the country where they are having the secessionist effort, I believe the Russians are backing to some extent. It did make you feel nervous because after all you came out of the hotel in the morning and you would see the ground covered with shell casings on the street and you could hear it at night. Sometimes umpteen animals would come strolling into the hotel, the lobby, with their automatic weapons, somewhat drunk. So anything could have happened without any advanced notice. So you had to keep your wits about you and look and observe and literally stay out of trouble or avoid it.

JOHN HELM
Administrative Officer
Tbilisi (1992)

Mr. Helm was born and raised in Tennessee and educated at Carson Newman College. Entering the Foreign Service in 1973, he served in posts throughout the world, primarily in the field of Administration, including General Services, Communications and Foreign Buildings. His overseas posts include: Banjul, Gambia; Panama City, Panama; Seville, Spain; Quito, Ecuador; Mogadishu, Somalia; Tbilisi, Georgia; Bonn, Germany and San Salvador, El Salvador. His Washington assignments were also in the field of Administration. Mr. Helm was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: *What was the situation like in Georgia at that time?*

HELM: Georgia's birth as a republic had been very difficult. There had been major fighting, warfare, in the city, and there were at least three civil wars going on in the city at that time. I could sit out on my balcony in the evening and watch the star shells and artillery blasting away in downtown Tbilisi. Each night a company of soldiers cordoned this particular hotel. It was a very nice hotel, very modern, Swiss management, American assistant managed, incidentally. They manned machine gun positions and bunkers around the hotel all night. In the early morning hours they would disappear. It was very tense. You couldn't move around very well. During the daytime it was okay, but at dark, chaos ruled. Everybody was off the streets at night. There was a dusk to dawn curfew, you would hear a lot of gunfire every night. There was a police post just below the hotel; I could see it from my balcony. A policeman would be there with a little stick, like a piece of broomstick about a foot long, with reflective tape on it. Any car that drove along, he would wave this stick and the car was supposed to stop and he would check the papers and find out the bona fides of the driver and passengers. If a car disregarded the policeman, it would go about another 50 feet, and a .30 caliber machine gun manned by the troops would just blow it away. So you'd be asleep in the hotel room and the .30 cal would go off right below your window and kill some poor people.

Q: Work wise, how could you get anything done? It would be your particular business to go out and get local supplies and get stuff done, and it doesn't sound like a very promising atmosphere in which to work.

HELM: The first thing we had to do, that we were working hard on, was assembling a local staff. I was the second admin officer; the embassy had actually been in operation for about a month when I got there. We were mainly attempting to hire the employees of the hotel. The hotel management threatened to kick us out if we persisted in this effort. We agreed that anybody currently working for the Metechi Palace Hotel was off limits. But of course their friends and relatives weren't. So we were networking in that way as best we could, trying to hire people. Of course there was no way we could do background investigations or loyalty checks or anything like that. And there was no way that we would know whether these people were KGB (Russian language acronym for the Committee on State Security) plants or not. We just assumed they all were. We were particularly concentrating on people that spoke English, since I didn't speak a word of Russian.

We probably did have KGB in that first group, but if they could do a job, that was good enough. The ambassador one day was called by Shevardnadze and he said, "I'm coming to the hotel; you ride with me." So the ambassador went and got in Shevardnadze's car with his bodyguard and they drove to a building that had been a very large, nice house, a very ornate, private residence. Shevardnadze walked in the door and announced to a young lady sitting inside the door at a desk that he was Shevardnadze, the president of the country, and effective that minute the building was being given to the Americans and it was going to be the American embassy, and that her organization had to leave. Well, this was just the receptionist; she ran off to tell the leadership that Shevardnadze was here, taking the building. We moved in to one room on the second floor of this building. The building tenant was the Friendship Society, which was the public affairs arm of the KGB. Shevardnadze had wanted to get rid of them, and Moscow had quit paying these people, but they kept coming to work anyway. So he was using us to displace them. We never left the room on the second floor. We slept there. Somebody was always in the room. We

built a tent inside the room and set up a laptop computer and an STU (secure telephone unit) telephone on an InMarSat pointed out the window. And that became our comcenter. You had to go into this tent because you didn't know if there were video lenses pointed at your screen. The only way you could be sure you could type anything on this computer was to be inside of the tent. It was hotter than hell in that tent.

We had to sleep with our equipment. At night, when the KGB people, the Friendship Society People, would go away, we would sneak out and take over another room. Throw their stuff out, then fight with them the next day. It was hilarious in a way. It was extremely tense. Because of the situation, you couldn't move go outside after dark; you had to stay in this building. It was a neat old building. It had been built by one of the generals that fought at Waterloo. One of the Russian generals was Georgian, and he stayed in Paris for ten or 15 years after the battle of Waterloo. When he came back he brought, they told me, a hundred wagon loads of stuff from Paris, loot that he had obtained, and built this fancy house. You could see it had a lot of Parisian architectural features: grand ballroom, the music room, etc. It was lovely, but it hadn't been kept up. It was filthy. It had gigantic chandeliers, but they were absolutely black. Anyway, we gathered up a group of about eight or ten Russian nationals working with us. They weren't really hired - we didn't have any personnel structure. So I sat down and wrote a personnel structure, a handbook, and everybody was paid out of the cashbox, in rubles.

When I got there the ruble was worth about 100 rubles to the dollar. When I left three months later it was about 5,000 to the dollar. We obtained permission to pay the FSNs in US dollars. We became the most popular employer in all of Georgia. Our money could be spent. I would fly up to Moscow about every two weeks and bring back a mail pouch full of US currency. You'd simply go out to the airport, fly to Moscow, go to the embassy, and they would hand you ten thousand or twenty thousand dollars in small bills. You were supposed to go to the airport by yourself, fly back to Georgia, get met by someone from the embassy - you hoped - while carrying this quantity of money. It was a recipe for getting your head busted. My first trip up there I've got \$10,000 in ones and fives. How am I going to transport this safely? I also had a shopping list of things I needed, and the biggest item on the list was cleaning supplies. We simply could not get the most basic cleaning supplies. So I went to the little embassy association store in Moscow and I bought every kind of cleaning supply I could find. I bought an iron. I had a huge mailbag full of cleaning supplies, soap and whatnot, and I put the money way down in the middle of it, and I put a padlock on it. I thought, "Anybody that steals this has got to be very strong to outrun me carrying this thing" because it must have weighed 70 pounds. I dragged this out to the airport, and got onto a Russian plane.

I don't know if you've flown Russian planes, but the seats are tiny. There's really no place below the seat to stick anything. I couldn't check the money. So I had to sit there the whole flight with this huge bag on my lap. They sold standee seats on the planes, just like the Greyhound bus; they would put as many people on the plane as would fit. I would be on the airplane with all this money. On one of these trips, I remember, I had dropped the bag. I heard something, a glass bottle down in there, break. Oh boy. There wasn't anything I could do about it. When I got to the embassy, opened it up, it was a bottle of ammonia. All my money was soaked in ammonia, but it still spent. And there was no doubt where that money came from. Nope, nope, nope.

One time I went up there. The rule was, if you went to the cashier and he handed you a broken package, you had to count every bill. But if he handed you a sealed package with the bank seals intact, you could take that without breaking it open and counting it. I went to the embassy and he handed me a stack of twenties, which was \$10,000, all sealed in plastic with seals on it. It was ten-dollar bills [sic]. I looked at the package and said, "Hey, look - this package is all broken. The bottom is all messed up." The cashier said, "Oh, you're right, take this one." So I grabbed that one and threw it in my mailbag, signed for it, and came back to the embassy in Tbilisi. I put the whole bag in the safe and opened it the next day. Looked at it, and it was 20-dollar bills. I'd signed for \$10,000 and I had taken \$20,000. I thought, I don't want to make the cashier look bad, because there was a lot of internal politics up there. I'm going to send a message back to Moscow that said, "John Helm and the twenties arrived safely."

So I sent that message off as a front channel cable and didn't hear anything of it. Nobody said anything. I went ahead and spent the money. While I was there, an FSN accountant came from Belgium, to audit me. He inspected all of my financial records, counted my money, and discovered that I had \$10,000 too much. I explained to him what had happened and he said okay, he'll take care of it, and thank you for not making a big issue of it. It would have been terribly embarrassing to this cashier in Moscow. He was a British guy, actually, Steve Wilkins. The next day he flew to Moscow and straightened it out. A few weeks later I ran out of money and went back to Moscow to get more. When I got there, the cashier took me out to the Irish Bar and bought me lunch. I said, "What's this for?" He says, "You could have kept the ten thousand. I didn't know where it was. We had no idea what had happened to that money. I thought I was going to have to pay for it out of my salary." I said, "But I sent you a message that said John Helm and the twenties. Didn't you pick up on that?" "No - THAT's why you said that. I wondered why you said that that way." "Yes, yes - but I didn't steal the money, did I? So all is well."

So there we are, six of us, running this embassy. We sent a diplomatic note over to the ministry announcing that the embassy was now in full operation, and a young man came from the foreign ministry and asked about the diplomatic note. I said, "Yeah, well this is a diplomatic note." He said, "Why did you word it this way?" "Well, that's how notes are always worded, everywhere in the world. It's part of the basic Vienna Convention diplomatic heritage that you write diplomatic notes in this rather formal way." He said, "Oh. You used different paper for the diplomatic note. You didn't use your ordinary letterhead paper." I said, "No, we have very special paper and envelopes that we use for diplomatic notes." Now we only had one package of this paper, but we did have one package. He says, "Well, what is the ministry supposed to do when we get this note?" I said, "Well, typically, the ministry will reply in some way to a note that says we received your note, or welcome to Georgia, or something. And typically there is some sort of a welcoming ceremony at the foreign ministry that the chargé would go to and be welcomed to the country." He says, "Oh. Is that all?" I said, "Well, most countries have some sort of a document on nice paper that they give to the chargé saying that they're here. What do you want to do?" He said, "Well, why don't I just tell you we got the note and thank you." I said, "Well that's fine. That's all I could ask for. Thank you." And he went away. Nice young guy, spoke good English.

Came back a week later and said, “We’ve gotten diplomatic i.d. cards. We sent off to Moscow and had them printed for us.” “Do you have one to show me?” He says, “Yes, I do. It’s here in my pocket. And there’s a problem. We want to know what you think about it.” He showed it to me. It was a nice little hardbound booklet i.d. card, typically used by European countries. It said Republic of Georgia, but it had the Soviet emblem. I said, “Why do you have the old Soviet seal?” “That’s the only seal they had. We didn’t have the mold made for our Georgian seal.” I said, “Do you really think you want to issue this with the Soviet seal?” He said, “Yeah, we were questioning that. We didn’t know if we wanted to or not.” I said, “You know, I really wouldn’t.” So he went away, and then it turned out that the country had produced passports also with the Soviet seal. It was difficult, starting a country.

Q: In a way, the Cold War was over and space was far more important than things like secret equipment, which sounds like it was pretty outmoded anyway.

HELM: This fellow was quite upset at us. I think he probably told the military guard to shoot us, but since I already had the guard on my payroll, he didn’t shoot. We found that spreading five dollar bills around rather frequently did wonders for making our lives better.

Q: Were there American Georgians who appeared?

HELM: There was one American Georgian that appeared. I’ll get to him in a sec. I was holding one-hour classes for all the FSNs to explain American government and democracy and the diplomatic system, what diplomats are. One of the questions that came up constantly was, “Why are you here? Why had America come to Tbilisi, Georgia? What do you want from us?” And our stock answer was, “We want you to join the family of nations as a peaceful, successful country. We want you to become part of the world diplomatic and economic system.” They never were sure we really meant that, but since they were on the payroll they went along with that as the official story. They were used to getting the official story.

While I was there we got a visit from the Secretary of State, Jim Baker. Here we are, this little six man embassy, and we’re getting a visit by a 90 person delegation. How are we going to put on this visit? They sent me a message from the department that said, “What do you need?” And I asked for a communications officer, some security officers, and money. I said, “Send a lot of money.”

Q: In small bills.

HELM: “Small bills. Green dollars, small bills. Send me a bunch of money.” Guthrie Guilline a communications specialist, arrived from Moscow a couple of days before the visit. He came to see me and said, “Are you John Helm?” “Yes.” “Can I see some i.d.?” “Well, yeah, here’s my DOS building pass.” “Okay, I have fifty thousand dollars in cash and a million rubles for you. Sign here.” So I had my communicator and my money. There was no shortage of security officers once the plane arrived with the Secretary. In that delegation was the military commander of all of Europe, a fellow by the name of Shalikashvili. He is of Georgian decent.

Q: He was head of the American army in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), I think.

HELM: I just figured he was the number one general in Europe, a four star general. His parents had emigrated from Georgia and he spoke some Georgian. On top of that, he was related to everybody in the country. He was the returning hero. He upstaged the Secretary at every venue. They didn't want to see Baker; they wanted to see Shalikashvili. He was a superhero. And he's the only Georgian-American that I ever saw there. There was a crowd in front of the hotel all claiming to be his relatives. We set him up in a hotel meeting room, almost like a throne room. He had a whole military delegation that traveled with him, and they were just leading people through. He would shake their hands, they would write down their name and his relationship to them. He had some kind of souvenir that he gave them, a card with his picture on it. He was giving these out until they ran out. It ran practically from dawn to dusk. When he would go to a meeting, people would simply stand there until he got back.

Q: How did you use the \$50,000 and million rubles?

HELM: I paid all the expenses, all the hotel bills, lots of rented cars, drivers. Everybody was paid in cash. Truthfully, I had so much money that I was able to run, without having to go back to Moscow, for the rest of my time there. I was there from May to August. It was a very exciting time because there was so much happening. I had a whole army of people, once I started paying in dollars. The back of the Chancery building had been a dump. Literally, it was just heaps of trash. I had laborers come in, got dump-trucks, and they hauled trash out of the back of the building for two weeks. As they dug down we discovered that we had a fireplug in the courtyard, it was paved, cobblestones, we found rooms down there that we didn't know we had, we hauled trash, trash, trash. I had eight or ten women working upstairs cleaning the ballrooms, scrubbing them. I went and bought a Russian floor polishing machine. They told me it was no good, it wouldn't last. It actually worked for a couple of weeks before it burned up. It cost \$15, or something like that. I was spending the money, doing anything I could to make the place look more like an embassy.

One thing that occurred during my period there was the fourth of July. We cleaned and we scrubbed. We got the ballrooms looking fairly good. We had no decorations, no fourth of July anything, but one of the things that had been shipped to me was an 11' by 17' American flag. The ballroom was tall enough that we were able to hang that flag vertically. That gives you an idea of the size of this place. It had about a 20-foot ceiling. You can imagine the magnitude of the room that you could do that in. We had probably 200 guests. We had the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, we had Shevardnadze, all of the people from his government. It was amazing the number of dignitaries that appeared out of the woodwork, considering that we started from nothing. We didn't know a soul the day we arrived.

Q: Was it a problem of various forces that were engaged in this civil war trying to co-opt the embassy?

HELM: No, we were never approached by anti-Shevardnadze forces. There was no attempt to coerce us. We had no security, though. None. One day a delegation of old women dressed in black dresses showed up, and they wanted to see the chargé. The Russian militia men and our locally hired watchmen just basically got out of their way and they came in and they invaded the

embassy. It was as close as we ever came to being overrun. The only room they didn't get in was our original communications room. And we were vastly outnumbered by these women. There were five or six of us, and 200 of them. "Holy mackerel, how am I going to get these women out of here, what's going to come of this?" We'd been overrun. They were everywhere, in every room.

Q: Looking at everything.

HELM: Oh yeah. And they all had pictures of their relatives who had been disappeared or had bad things happen to them during this period of civil war. I went out in the hallway through the crowd of women, and there was one that seemed to be the leader. She was holding up an 8 by 10 glossy, and it was a picture of an attractive young girl laying face up naked on a stone slab, like a morgue, and she had been disfigured. The woman was saying - I didn't know at the time but was later told - that this was her daughter who'd been taken by Shevardnadze's forces and gang raped, tortured, and murdered, and that she'd been sent a picture of her taken at the morgue. I grabbed this picture and looked at it. This was horrible. I walked down the steps carrying the picture, and the woman followed me, and all the rest of them followed her. I led the whole crowd, like the pied piper, walking and saying, "This is horrible, this is the most awful thing I've ever seen in my life," and it truly was. I walked all the way out to the street, crossed the street into a park, still holding this lady's picture. When the last of them had left the embassy following me, they locked the doors of the building. That left the embassy restored, but it left me standing in the park with this picture. Now what the hell am I going to do? So I went by the street, and here came a taxi. I had a dollar bill in my pocket, might have been a five, and I pull it out and waved it at the taxi and he stopped. I handed the woman her photograph, got in the taxi, and drove away. Went about three blocks, got out, and walked to the back door of the embassy. It pays to be crazy.

Q: It does, it does. Also, I think you got a good insight into what is known as "babushka power."

HELM: Yes. They can walk through anything. It was funny that they all followed me. They didn't steal anything, break anything, misbehave. They simply wanted somebody to see what horrors had been done to them and their families by the Shevardnadze government. Well, what can we say? We're supporting Shevardnadze. He's our host. That was one time when not speaking a word of Russian may have been the best possible thing. I spoke to them in English and said, "This is the most horrible thing I ever saw. Look at this, this is terrible." And other sympathetic noises. And was able to extract myself from the crowd and get away.

RUDOLF V. PERINA
Special Negotiator for Eurasian Conflicts
(2001-2003)

Ambassador Perina was born in Czechoslovakia when that country was under communist control. He escaped with his family to Morocco, then Switzerland and finally the United States. The ambassador was educated at the University of Chicago and Columbia University. Entering the Foreign Service in 1974, Mr.

Perina specialized in Military-Political Affairs at posts abroad, including Moscow, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna and Belgrade. In Washington he served on the National Security Council, specializing in Soviet issues. From 1998 to 2001 Mr. Perina was US Ambassador to Moldova. Ambassador Perina was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2006

Q: So what was the next conflict you worked on?

PERINA: Let's turn to Abkhazia. This is a region on the Black Sea within Georgia that seceded from Georgia when the Soviet Union came apart. The reasons also stemmed from ethnic hatred with a very long history. There was a war between Georgians and Abkhaz in 1992, and it was a very cruel and bloody war. Probably twenty to thirty thousand people were killed, with atrocities committed on both sides. I recognized the minute I started working on this that it would be the most difficult of the four conflicts in my portfolio to resolve. The hatred between Abkhaz and Georgians was the worst I had ever seen in either the Balkans or the Caucasus. It was even greater than that between Serbs and Albanians. This was for historic reasons but also because of the cruelty and nature of the war. It was an unusual war. In most ethnic conflicts of this sort a majority ethnically cleanses a minority. In Abkhazia, however, the reverse was true. The Abkhaz had been an ethnic minority of about 100 thousand people out of half a million but with Russian and Chechen help they ethnically cleansed several hundred thousand Georgians. The entire region after the war had a population of about 175 thousand, which is fewer than the number of displaced Georgians. This meant that the Abkhaz were dead set against any settlement that would allow even a portion of the Georgians to return, which was the prime demand of the Georgians. So there was very little common ground to work with for a settlement.

I always believed that another reason for the difficulty of resolving this conflict was that Abkhazia was really worth fighting over. It is gorgeous, with mountains coming right down to the Black Sea. Since I was the negotiator, I had opportunity to visit all of these secessionist regions, even though American diplomats were normally restricted from travel there because we did not recognize the regimes. I never found Transnistria or Nagorno-Karabakh or for that matter Kosovo particularly attractive, and South Ossetia least of all. But Abkhazia is prime real estate, potentially a big Club Med. I visited during tangerine season, and there were these orchards of tangerine trees right by the seacoast with a Mediterranean climate and beautiful scenery. It was also fascinating because driving from Georgia proper to Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, there were all these abandoned houses and villas along the road. This was because after 200,000 Georgians were expelled, the Abkhaz could not fully populate the area. There were some groups that started coming, particularly Russians and Armenians, but it was not enough to re-populate the region and fill all those abandoned homes.

Q: Were there Russians in the region?

PERINA: There were, in many different capacities. There were a growing number of Russian tourists and also Russian investors and businessmen who saw the potential of the area. There were several Russian bases in Georgia, including in Abkhazia, that were a holdover from Soviet days but still held by the Russians. But most importantly, there was a peacekeeping force in Abkhazia of several thousand Russian troops. This had been part of the ceasefire arrangements in

1994. The peacekeeping force was supposed to be a CIS (Confederation of Independent States) force but in practice it was all Russian, and it was one of the big political problems. The Georgians agreed to the force in 1994 but thereafter recognized that it was really functioning as a protective force for Abkhazia. In my time, the Georgians were always demanding that the Russians pull out but then backed away after the Abkhaz said this would lead to a renewed war. This was a lot of discussion of finding a substitute force from other countries but no agreement was ever reached on one, and not many countries volunteered to be peacekeepers. So there was always a crisis when the time came for the annual renewal of the CIS peacekeeping mandate but in fact it was always renewed.

Q: So how did the negotiations work?

PERINA: The negotiating structure was totally different from the one in Nagorno-Karabakh. The United Nations was in charge of this conflict and not the OSCE. There was in fact a United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) that was responsible for overseeing the ceasefire and the work of the peacekeepers. This did not work very well because the Russian general in charge of the peacekeepers did not feel at all responsible to a civilian UN diplomat who was in charge of the Mission. UNOMIG had a presence of several hundred people in Sukhumi but this was no match to several thousand Russian troops. The UN role did determine that the political negotiations regarding Abkhazia took place in UN contexts, on many different levels. There was a formal negotiating process of which we were not members and that involved the United Nations, Russia, the Georgians and the Abkhaz. This very soon got bogged down and was not going anywhere. Then there were negotiations in New York, in the Security Council, within a group called the Friends of the Secretary General on Georgia. This friends group was basically a number of countries that had expressed interest in this conflict and met periodically to discuss it and give recommendations to the Secretary General. The Friends Group included the United States, Russia, France, the UK and Germany, among a few others. So a lot of negotiating was done in this context. But then in addition, a special mechanism was set up in my time to try to activate discussions between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. This effort was undertaken by the UN Undersecretary for Peacekeeping, a Frenchman named Jean Marie Guéhenno. He organized a series of meetings at UN headquarters in Geneva to discuss the Abkhaz issue among the key members of the Friends Group and with the Georgians and Abkhaz. I was the U.S. representative to these meetings, and the first three were held in my time—in February and July of 2003 and then in February of 2004. The first one involved just the UN, U.S., UK, Russia, France and Germany, and the following two included the Georgians and the Abkhaz.

Q: Anything come of these?

PERINA: Unfortunately, I can't say it did. Within the Friends group, the Russians were clearly protective of the Abkhaz, and when we did get an Abkhaz representative to Geneva, he was absolutely unrelenting in refusal to engage in any discussion that would imply the slightest Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia. And this was supposedly one of the more moderate Abkhaz leaders, their so-called Foreign Minister Sergey Shamba. So the effort was made and a lot of opportunity for talks existed but the process never took off. I think perhaps the only function of it—and this is something of value—was again that the existence of the process reduced the pressure on the Georgian side for military action against Abkhazia. The Georgian

government was under a lot of pressure from the 200,000 refugees to do something about Abkhazia. If a negotiating process had not existed, the calls for war would have been even greater. As I was leaving the Special Negotiator job, I felt that this was the most dangerous of the conflicts I had worked on, and that a definite danger existed that it could erupt into a hot war. It became even more dangerous and unstable after Saakashvili became President of Georgia. During my tenure, the President was still Shevardnadze.

Q: Were you there during the Rose Revolution?

PERINA: No. That came after I left. I was there during Shevardnadze's time.

Q: What was Shevardnadze's attitude?

PERINA: I met with him a couple of times during my visits to Tbilisi. Frankly, he was a bit past his prime. There was a lot of unhappiness with him among Georgians, and his popularity ratings had fallen to single digits in some polls. He said all the right things about resolving the Abkhaz conflict but there wasn't much energy behind the words. He was confused on how to go forward and seemed just to be coasting in his presidency. Our meetings were pleasant but never very productive.

Q: Was he afraid to stand up to the Russians?

PERINA: It is difficult to say. He was critical of the Russians, though certainly not as much as his successor Saakashvili. The Russians were playing a dirty game in Abkhazia. Formally they said they were against secession but in practice they did everything to help Abkhazia stay independent of Georgia. This was similar to what they were doing in Transnistria and South Ossetia. The Russians could have helped force a settlement if they wanted to. Abkhazia is not really viable as an independent state. It has less than 200,000 people since the end of the fighting. It would have a very difficult time remaining independent. Probably, it would sooner or later join Russia, and that may be exactly what the Russians are hoping. During my time, I had the suspicion that the Russians and Abkhaz were working toward an eventual partition of the region in which a strip in the south would go to Georgia and the rest join Russia. There is a region in the south of Abkhazia called Gali where in fact the Abkhaz had a very different policy than in the rest of Abkhazia. They were allowing Georgian refugees to return and so on. They may have been working toward an eventual partition as a compromise with Georgia to end the conflict. But this is just a suspicion based on what was happening in Gali. I have no real evidence for it.

Q: OK, what is the next conflict?

PERINA: That would be South Ossetia, a small region in the north of Georgia on the Russian border. It is only about two and a half hours by car from Tbilisi. It is called South Ossetia because there is a North Ossetia within Russia proper, right across the border. This is another case of secession by an ethnic group that did not want to be part of an independent Georgia. The story is similar to that of Abkhazia but on a smaller and far more muted scale. There was also a hot war between South Ossetians and Georgians in 1991 and a ceasefire imposed on Georgia by Russia in 1992. Probably about a thousand people died in the fighting, and tens of thousands of

Ossetians fled to the north, into Russia. South Ossetia had a population of about 100,000 before the war, divided roughly into two-thirds Ossetians and one-third Georgians. The population now is probably not more than 70,000, in roughly the same proportion. You can see that this was a smaller war, and the stakes are smaller than in Abkhazia. It also was not as brutal. But still it remains an unresolved conflict because the region does not accept Georgian sovereignty and is protected in this by Russia.

Q: Did it seem that this conflict could be resolved more easily?

PERINA: Definitely. This is what many people believed, and I believed as well. There was a different dynamic to this conflict. The hatreds were not as deep as in Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, most of the history of the region had been peaceful. Inter-marriages between Georgians and Ossetians were not unusual. The outburst of Georgian nationalism after independence had sparked the conflict but there seemed to be hope of bringing the ethnic groups together again. There was no more violence underway by the time I got involved, and a peacekeeping force of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian forces, plus an OSCE monitoring mission, were keeping things fairly quiet. The conventional wisdom about South Ossetia was that it was not a dangerous conflict and that the Ossetians were waiting to see how the Abkhaz conflict would be resolved and then try to piggy-back on it in cutting a deal with the Georgians.

Q: What kind of a deal?

PERINA: Well, that would depend of what kind of deal the Abkhaz cut. But at one point I had the notion that perhaps we should try reversing this—rather than waiting for South Ossetia to copy Abkhazia, we should start by resolving South Ossetia and seeing if that might help promote an Abkhazia settlement. So I made a trip by car to the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali to meet with the leadership. Unfortunately, however, there was a power struggle underway within this leadership. A rather moderate President, or so-called President, who many thought would be willing to find a resolution of the conflict had just been replaced with strong Russian backing by a hardliner named Eduard Kokoity. Kokoity was in Moscow when I visited and so I was told I could only meet with one of his deputies, a person so unremarkable that I honestly do not remember his name, though it will be in the reporting cable. He was also pretty hardline in not willing to even discuss any compromise to South Ossetia's so-called independence. The one thing he did want to discuss was any possibility of American economic assistance to the region. This was not surprising given the incredible poverty of the region, which was the most salient thing that I remember about it. Tskhinvali was this dusty little town with empty streets and hardly any people that I could see. It was a very depressing place. There was more life to be seen on the road to and from Tbilisi but it consisted largely of open air markets where things like old automobiles and machinery appeared to be on sale. I was later told that this was indeed part of the basically black-market economy of South Ossetia, where stolen and custom-free goods were sold and smuggled into Georgia proper. Like Transnistria except on a smaller and poorer scale, South Ossetia basically found a niche in black-market dealings. One person facetiously called it a big parking lot for stolen cars.

Q: So the black market kept it going?

PERINA: I think it was a big part of the reason. I would say two things kept it going: the economic interests that stemmed from the black market and then Russia. There was probably a lot of overlap between these two. The Russians had both economic and political interests to keep it going. My impression, and everything I heard from other observers, was that most of the population would have been ready for a settlement. There was in particular a real desire for Western economic assistance. The region was terribly poor. One Westerner in Georgia who had been watching the situation for a long time told me that basically South Ossetia could be bought for 100 million dollars. Not literally bought, of course. He meant that an offer of such an assistance program would convince most South Ossetians to re-join Georgia. I think that the European Union tried the approach of offering a large amount of assistance. The European Union in fact took a special interest in this conflict, perhaps also thinking that it was the one most likely to be solved. The EU was looking for projects to enhance its international profile and would very much have wanted itself to be seen as the main force in resolving one of the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus. The EU did a lot in South Ossetia but the main reason it all failed was, in my view, Russian resistance. Moscow was just not ready to give up the region, particularly after Saakashvili came to office and Russian–Georgian relations plummeted. The Russians wanted to hold South Ossetia, if only as additional leverage against Georgia.

End of reader