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The guns of August 2008. Russia's war in Georgia

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largely to published sources and the only non-English materials he uses are in French. For German opinion, he relies exclusively on English-language translations of German writings, on writings by Anglophone residents in wartime Germany, and on non-German secondary sources of the highest quality, such as Roger Chickering’s monumental study of Freiburg at war: *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). He also intersperses materials written during the war with memoir literature, without analyzing how, for instance, the portrayal of pre-1914 European society in a book such as Stefan Zweig’s *Die Welt von Gestern*, written shortly before the author’s suicide in 1941, might be colored by the author’s experiences in the decades since the Great War’s end. Given that one of the main points of *Dance of the Furies* is to distinguish how events were received at the time from how they came to be viewed in retrospect, this rather uncritical approach to the source material is rather perplexing.

Neiberg does not hesitate to join in the recent scholarly tendency to view Germany and the Habsburg monarchy as the prime aggressors in 1914. However, this insight remains extraneous to the substance of the book, which focuses on each public’s perception (whether justified or not) of its own country as victim rather than aggressor. That is all well and good. Nonetheless, it would have been interesting to learn more about how each country’s distinctive approach to censorship, propaganda, and information management may have differentially affected public opinion. Alternatively, if, as this book seems to imply, regime type had no differential impact on public opinion in the early phases of the war, it would have been worth discussing why that might have been so.

These and other questions raised by Neiberg’s work remain intriguing issues for future research.

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The short war between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Georgia in August 2008 was experienced as a Cold War flash back in the United States. Images of Russian tanks invading a sovereign state on its borders re-awakened memories of the Soviet invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. Politicians and pundits across the political spectrum condemned the Russian action. At the end of the month *Time* magazine put a retro looking Russian soldier in a tank on its cover with the heading: “How to Stop a New Cold War.” It is thus something of a surprise that Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr begin their edited collection of essays on this war with the claim that the media coverage during the crucial first few days largely reflected Russia’s line, adding that “[w]e now know part of the reason for this, namely that the Russian government had flown some fifty Russian reporters to Tskhinvali days before the war began.” This detail, and
the reproduction of a flyer distributed to Russian troops in July 2008 telling them Georgia’s armed forces were their enemy at the beginning of this book, suggests a conspiracy. Cornell and Starr believe there was one. The August war did not just happen, a collection of misperceptions, miscalculations and mobilization concerns like the August 1914 portrayed by Barbara Tuckman. Instead “the events of August 2008 were the culmination of a long preparatory period that began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, if not earlier” (p. 5). If Georgian leader Saakashvili stumbled in August 2008, it was into a carefully laid trap. Motivated by countering Russia’s informational war (as they see it), this volume appeared less than a year after the August war, and before the release of the Council of the European Union’s Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, commonly known as the Tagliavini Report (September 2009). Ronald Asmus’s study, A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Ruslan Pukhov’s military account of the war, the Tanks of August (Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, Moscow, 2010) subsequently added to the growing literature on the war. The volume’s contributors are American, Georgian, Russian and Swedish, part of a network of defense policy intellectuals caroled by the editors who are founders of the Central Asia-Caucusus Institute & Silk Road Program, a privately funded think tank associated with the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC and the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy.

All of the essays in this volume are valuable contributions to understanding the circumstances of this war. The always-entertaining Thomas Goltz begins the volume with a reprise of themes from his diary volumes. Thornike Gordadze offers valuable historical background. After the tumultuous early nineties, he notes, “both Russia and Georgia came back to their classical national projects: for Russia, the restoration of an empire or at the very least a zone of influence; for Georgia, the construction of a nation-state” (p. 29). He reminds us that it was Yeltsin that first (re)initiated the idea of a special Russian sphere of influence in the Caucasus, the terms ‘near abroad’ and ‘post-Soviet space’ signifying this sphere in colloquial ways. Andrei Illarionov, a Russian libertarian economist once part of Putin’s economic team and now a fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington DC, provides a chapter chock full of interesting detail about the Russian leadership’s preparation for war against Georgia, some frustratingly unsourced. His considerable effort, however, is undermined by occasional lapses into overly simplified geopolitical reasoning – “Moscow was so dissatisfied...”; “Moscow promptly punished...” – and adherence to a ‘grand plan’ conception of the war: “The scene was now set for war. Now all that was necessary was the spark to start it” (p. 72). Amidst all his compelling detail, it is easy to forget that the Tagliavini Report found that “open hostilities began with a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounding areas, launched in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008” (Volume I, p. 19). Indeed this inconvenient fact is only seriously addressed more than half way through the volume.

Niklas Nilsson provides a helpful overview of the impact of Saakashvili’s ascent to power on Georgian politics after the popular revolt against Shevardnadze’s rule in November 2003, events read, as he points out, by the Russian defense establishment as “a political shift orchestrated by the US” (p. 102). Revealing the significant divide in geopolitical perceptions between the sides, Stephen Blank is sharp in his criticism of “the West” for its neglect of the Caucasus. He cites Donald Kagan who suggests, “peace does not preserve itself” and endorses the sentiment that “Europe will never be entirely secure if the Caucasus is left out of Europe’s security purview” (p. 105). He concludes that “if America or the West as a whole fail to shape the aftermath of wars of vital interests, unfriendly powers
will do so, and with dangerous consequences for the West” (p. 121). While this rhetoric recalls the Cold War, the notion that the Caucasus contains wars of “vital interests” is a twenty-first century creation. The essays that follow do little to challenge this notion. Essays by David Smith, Johanna Popjanevski, Pavel Felgenhauer, Paul Goble and James Sherr underscore how an imperial mindset and geopolitical outlook drove the Russian confrontation with, and subsequent plan to attack Georgia. “Russian fears, Russian power, and Russian imprudence demarcate the problem we face” is Sheer’s pithy summation.

Given the volume’s purpose, it is not surprising (but nevertheless regrettable) that there is no essay exploring the security perceptions of those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This would have complicated the story, of course, in revealing an important localized dimension to the conflict (as I argued at the time). In this volume the August War is read at the scale the Georgian government presents it, as an inter-state war rather than, as the Tagliavani report described it, an inter-state and intra-state war. More surprising is the lack of systematic engagement with “Russia’s line” on its own terms, namely the very same doctrine of “responsibility to protect” that NATO used to justify its Kosovo intervention. It is surely worth some comment that both great powers used the same playground metaphor to spin the war: a bully neighbor was beating up little Ossetia/Georgia. Interpreting Russian rhetoric as propaganda, geopolitical calculation and informational war risks missing what is meaningful for its leadership and Russophone publics. Analysis runs the risk of being unfalsifiable. Putin’s well-known outburst to Sarkozy about Saakashvili, for example, suggests less than cool calculation on the part of the Russian leadership. Finally the volume could have used a concluding chapter from the editors that explicitly addressed the ‘guns of August’ analogy as it offers a means of reconciling pre-planning and eventful escalations. Despite the power asymmetries involved, this was a co-created war.

Georgia under the leadership of Mikhail Saakashvili has become a cause in the Caucasus for many Western security professionals and think tanks. It is easy to get swept up in its terms, not least because the Georgian government successfully frames debate in Cold War universals, and regional security experts tend to inflate the geopolitical significant of their bailiwick. Russia’s security presence in the region is also easy to dislike. But does contempt for spheres of influence, and support for an obstreperous friend in the region create a new vital interest for the West? Is upgrading the geopolitical status to NATO of Russia’s ‘soft underbelly’ prudent and wise? These and other important strategic policy questions arise from the provocative essays in this volume. Writing immediately after the August war Anatol Lieven suggested in ‘The West shares the blame for Georgia,’ (Financial Times 13 August 2008), that it is “irresponsible, unethical and above all contemptible” to extend security guarantees to states that NATO does not intend to defend. The issue of NATO membership for Georgia remains a live one. If NATO brings Georgia under its security umbrella, is this equivalent to what Khrushchev did with Cuba in 1962, and might this prime a geopolitical chain reaction? Does the legacy of August 2008 hold within it the potential to create a future ‘guns of August’? These questions are worth asking because, despite digital age hype, geographic location still matters in international affairs.

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