



Review

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Asmus, Ronald D. *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2010. xii + 254 pp. Map. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £20.00: \$27.00.

Those inclined to conspiracy theories and/or consumed by Cold War-era russophobia, will find this book a compelling read, especially if they know nothing about Georgia. Already it has captivated the usual suspects. Senator John McCain who, at the time of the events described herein, produced the unforgettable (albeit misguided) comment: 'We are all Georgians now!', deems it 'required reading' (dust-jacket). Strobe Talbott also lends endorsement with a short Preface.

Asmus, who died on 30 April 2011 but who was Executive Director of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Centre at the time of this book's composition, hatches a simple plot, though his inability to spell correctly the name of South Ossetia's president (Kokoiti, not Koikoty) calls into question his regional expertise.

The Kremlin (pre-eminently Vladimir Putin), irritated by Georgian President Mikheil Saak'ashvili's virulent anti-Russian, pro-Western stance and angered at the West's recognition of Kosovo, decided to punish Georgia once the Bucharest NATO meeting (April 2008) resolved to consider offering Georgia (and Ukraine) a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at its next (December) meeting. This had to be stopped. The West ignored warnings, as provocations intensified in South Ossetia to trap the impulsive Saak'ashvili into taking the bait and starting a war, thereby giving Russia the excuse it needed to attack and maybe even capture Tbilisi; in any event, Saak'ashvili's humiliation would be such that his government would collapse. Russian military might was ready (though perhaps Saak'ashvili's order to attack late on 7 August caught it on the hop), and Tbilisi was duly taught its lesson. With George Bush leaving peace negotiations in the hands of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whilst the Georgian capital and government were saved, the ceasefire was unjust. The lesson of all this? The US and Europe should 'recommit to building democracy in Georgia and finding new ways to tie Tbilisi [...] to the West' (p. 234).

If this includes implementation of the recommendation to 'work with NATO allies in crafting a comprehensive, transparent approach to security assistance and military sales in the region' ('Striking the Balance: US Policy and Stability in Georgia', report to the US Committee on Foreign Relations of 22 December 2009), this will only reprise the recklessness that fuelled Saak'ashvili's pre-war appetite for weaponry and lead to further bloodshed.

I agree with Asmus in two respects: the West unwisely neglected the Caucasus (preoccupied, as in the mid-nineteenth century, with Balkan dilemmas) and behaved foolishly at Bucharest. But Asmus's arguments are flawed. NATO membership for Georgia should never have been contemplated. Once tabled, it should have been rejected, but the compromise forced by the obstinacy of former Eastern Bloc members, carrying their own anti-Russian agendas, virtually guaranteed conflict before December, given Saak'ashvili's desperation to reestablish control over the disputed territories (both to satisfy NATO and to fulfil election pledges). Asmus dismisses the idea that the origins of the 2008 fighting lie in the ethnic rivalries with the Abkhazians and South

Ossetians (p. 215), both of whom are ritualistically derided as Russia's pawns. I beg to differ. Saak'ashvili and his then Minister of Defence, the half-Ossetian Irak'li Okruashvili, had moved against South Ossetia in 2004. In 2006, contrary to the 1994 Moscow ceasefire, he stationed troops in Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley, and there is ample evidence, even admitted by Asmus, that plans for attacks on both regions had long been devised; Abkhazia expected an incursion in May 2008. If the Americans, who (Asmus constantly reiterates) took every opportunity to warn Saak'ashvili not to pursue the military option, and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt (p. 143) knew of these plans, is it not reasonable to assume that the Russians also knew and, given their internationally sanctioned peace-keeping roles in both disputed regions, would take precautions (e.g. upgrading southern Abkhazia's railtrack, as happened in the spring of 2008, to ensure speedy access to the border, or holding an army nearby across the mountains)? Asmus detects sinister motives in Russia's military exercises in the North Caucasus prior to the conflagration but says nothing of Georgia's participation in NATO manoeuvres that summer (and earlier). Brigadier-General Mamuk'a Q'urashvili's statement (evening 7 August), widely interpreted as letting Saak'ashvili's cat out of the bag, that Tbilisi's goal was 'to restore constitutional order in the whole region' (namely, South Ossetia) is excused by Asmus as the misspoken utterance of a field-general confused by having a microphone thrust under his nose (p. 39).

Everyone, even Asmus, accepts that the Georgians fired the first shots, thereby initiating the conflict, though the world was quick to accept Saak'ashvili's charge that he was responding to Russian aggression, a claim energetically disseminated by Randy Scheunemann's PR firm, Mercury Group (coincidentally Senator McCain's agency), contracted to spin Georgia's case to the world — on this Asmus is silent. Ever ready with excuses, Asmus says that the provocations were such that Saak'ashvili had no alternative. Even allowing this allegation to be true, if the result of submitting to provocation is death and destruction followed by crushing military defeat, is it not more sensible not to be provoked? And if Saak'ashvili was deluded into thinking that the 7th Cavalry would ride to his rescue, then the US authorities should seriously ask themselves why he might have harboured such fantasies. Without Saak'ashvili's fateful decision, it is inconceivable that the Russians would have acted against Georgia, but if their goal had been to take Tbilisi and oust Saak'ashvili, does Asmus really think that they would not have done it? And if war was the aim, why did Vitalii Churkin, Russia's UN Ambassador, summon an extraordinary meeting of the Security Council at 05.15 GMT on 8 August to consider a ceasefire, only for the USA (with predictable UK backing) to block the call? Asmus never mentions this.

Had Russia not responded, Abkhazia would undoubtedly have been the next target. Instead, the opportunity was taken to expel the Georgian troops from their illegal deployment in the K'odor Valley, which was achieved with only one (Abkhazian) fatality; incidentally, Abkhazian ground forces alone made the ascent. Asmus claims that Russia had 20,000 troops in Abkhazia, over double the true number. In disabling Georgia's two military bases in Gori (near South Ossetia) and Senak'i (near Abkhazia) and in sinking the vessels that threatened Abkhazia from the port of Poti, Russia was only doing

what military logic dictated — preventing Georgia from initiating further hostilities. Nicolai Petro ('The Legal Case for Russian Intervention in Georgia', *Fordham International Law Journal*, May 2009) argues that every aspect of Russia's intervention conformed to international law and its peace-keeping mandate.

Georgia had effectively lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia years before Saak'ashvili's presidency, but Saak'ashvili's actions finally prompted Russia's recognition of the republics (26 August 2008), thereby hammering the final nail into the coffin of Georgia's vain hopes for reintegration and winning for Russia a permanent presence south of the mountains. The question now is: how to proceed with creating a peaceful and stable Transcaucasia to everyone's advantage? America and the West should also learn that, if they are going to engage successfully with understudied regions, they should familiarize themselves with all local nuances beforehand. Meddling in ignorance can lead to alliances with unsavoury (not to say buffoonish) characters. *Pace* McCain, Talbott, Brzezinski, Havel and Bildt, books like this do little to enlighten or encourage the learning of essential lessons but only serve to perpetuate dangerous myths.

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