

BOOK REVIEW

THE GUNS OF AUGUST 2008

RUSSIA'S WAR IN GEORGIA

EDITED BY SVANTE E. CORNELL AND FREDERICK STARR

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*Review by Till Bruckner**



“At the very least, it will be all but impossible hereafter for anyone to deny that Russia had engaged in detailed planning for precisely the war that occurred,” write editors Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr of the Central Asia–Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program in the introduction of their new book on the August 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia.

The volume develops three main themes. First, it presents evidence that Russia had been actively engaged in preparing for fighting a war against Georgia prior to August 2008. Second, it argues that the culpability for the conflict lies overwhelmingly with Russia. Third, it claims that Georgia’s actions were justified both morally and legally, irrespective of who may have fired the first shot in that fateful month.

The volume fully achieves its main aim, documenting convincingly that Russia had been preparing for a military confrontation in the region. Andrei Illarionov, a former Chief Economic Advisor to Putin, asserts that Russia’s rulers had decided to wage war against Georgia as early as 1999-2003. While this claim is insufficiently supported – extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, which Illarionov fails to provide – the bulk of his chapter chronicles in detail Russian preparations for a conflict from May 2008 onwards, including troop increases, railroad repairs and the Kavkaz-2008 military exercises. David Smith further expands on this theme, arguing that Russia had been preparing for a war of

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aggression against Georgia since Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. The leadership in Tbilisi had been aware of these preparations, Smith asserts, but its allies in the West turned a blind eye to the compelling evidence presented to them over a period of months and failed to react effectively to Georgia's repeated pleas for help. In the third chapter, Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer also supplies evidence that Russia had been engaged in preparations for conflict for several months preceding the conflict.

While the data compiled by Illarionov, Smith and Felgenhauer leave no doubt that Russia had indeed been preparing for conflict, preparing for war is not the same as planning to launch a war of aggression. In fact, Russia might have had good reasons to believe that Georgia – a country that was publicly committed to rapidly reclaiming both South Ossetia and Abkhazia by all means necessary – might have been intending to force a military solution upon Russia's allies in the region.

Thus, in order to pinpoint Russia as the culprit, it is necessary to support the evidence for preparations with an assessment of culpability. Who actually started the war? Illarionov's key 'smoking gun' is the arrival of Russian journalists in Tskhinvali one week before the full-scale fighting began, an event that he documents extremely well. However, following this line of argument, Moscow might have sent in its media because it knew that Georgia was about to attack, and simply positioned journalists to help legitimize its subsequent reaction to an initial Georgian aggression. Felgenhauer seems agnostic on the question of who fired the first shot, but argues convincingly that Georgia's leaders had not expected to encounter a fully-fledged Russian invasion force. This casts doubt on Smith's version of the events, according to which it had been clear to anybody who wished to see that Russia was preparing for a large-scale cross-border incursion.¹

In her chapter, legal expert Johanna Popjanevski states that "both sides are responsible for the escalation of hostilities in July and early August" 2008. Her article focuses on the events in the days and hours immediately prior to the Georgian advance into Tskhinvali. Tbilisi claims that it only attacked after Russian troops had already started rolling into South Ossetia through the Roki tunnel, while Moscow maintains that Georgian troops moved first, forcing it to invade. After a review of rival claims and timelines, Popjanevski leans towards the Georgian version, cautiously concluding that "the evidence of Russian troop movement on August 7 is compelling but for now circumstantial."

This lack of hard evidence itself seems strange. The United States has never presented the world with satellite imagery that would conclusively prove an initial Russian incursion. With a major Russian military build-up underway on the borders of a key US client state, and clear skies over South Ossetia during the days in question, it is hard to believe that no US satellite was in position at the time. Notably, in the early days of the war, the United States merely berated Russia for its "disproportionate *response*"² (my emphasis), implying recognition that Georgia moved first.

¹ In fact, Smith – portrayed as a scholar and "columnist" in his short biography at the end of the volume – is commonly regarded in Tbilisi as a propagandist paid to present the Georgian government in the best possible light, and to support it as an advisor. This reviewer finds it hard to understand why the editors solicited a contribution by a spin doctor for publication in a scholarly volume.

² Michael Abramowitz and Colum Lynch, "Bush, Cheney Increasingly Critical," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/10/AR2008081002311.html> (accessed December 21, 2009).

Those interested in the question of who first initiated large-scale operations might want to read Popjanevski's chapter in parallel with a recent article by Wolfgang Richter, an army colonel who was involved in the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the conflict. Richter claims that President Saakashvili's order to attack "merely triggered the attack of [Georgian] forces which were already deployed in the field in combat order. Obviously, their logistical and tactical preparations, including those in the frontline, had started much earlier." While some Russian forces probably did pass through the Roki tunnel before the Georgian attack, Richter writes, "their size, functions and capabilities do not substantiate the claim of an imminent or progressing invasion."³ This reviewer lacks both the military expertise and the data to decide which version of events comes closer to the truth.

Popjanevski hedges her position⁴ by arguing that the question of who first initiated large-scale operations "should not be treated as the sole determinant for who was responsible" for two reasons. First, as it was Russia and not Georgia that crossed an international border in August, the burden of proof lies with Moscow – an excellent point, and one that has frequently been overlooked in the past. Second, international law permits a pre-emptive strike if an attack by the other side is imminent, which, according to Popjanevski, Georgia at the time had good reason to believe it was.

The core chapters of the book are framed by several additional contributions. Thomas Goltz provides an excellent overview of the historical context. While readers familiar with Goltz's book on Georgia will find little new here, his well-written and lively narrative will not disappoint newcomers to the region. Thornike Gordadze gives a useful summary of Georgian-Russian relations in the 1990s. Niklas Nilsson's chapter on Georgia's Rose Revolution is even-handed and rich in empirical detail but analytically weak, peppered with donor-speak about "vibrant civil society" and teleological references to a "democratization process on the back burner." Paul Goble discusses the "information war" between Russia and Georgia, while Stephen Blank and James Sherr deal with the international dimensions of the prelude and aftermath to the conflict, respectively.

Over wide stretches (and with some notable exceptions) "The Guns of August 2008" reads like an indictment of Russia more than an impartial and balanced piece of scholarship. In particular, the evident desire of some of the contributors to depict Russia as the 'bad guy' leads them straight into the trap of trying to paint Georgia as the contrasting 'good guy'. In this line of thinking, if Russia is aggressive, Georgia must be peaceable; if Russia is dictatorial, Georgia must be democratic. The resulting narrative of small, reasonable, peace-loving, democratic and – above all – innocent Georgia being maliciously savaged by a barbarous bear from the north is deeply misleading.

A retelling of the story of the August 2008 conflict as a clash between "good" and "evil" obscures three highly salient points. First, most South Ossetians and Abkhazians do not want to return into Tbilisi's fold. Second, a peaceful resolution of the conflict within a framework

³ Wolfgang Richter, "Initial Military Operations during the War in Georgia in August 2008," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 10, November 2, 2009, 5-9.

<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=109175> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁴ This reviewer contacted Popjanevski by email two weeks before this review was submitted, asking whether recent findings have caused her to change her assessment that "the evidence of Russian troop movement on August 7 is compelling". Regrettably, she did not reply in time for her answer to be included in this article.

of Georgian sovereignty was never a realistic option. Third, Georgia has been the main revisionist power in the region since 2004. The following section explores these three points in more depth.

1. The highly pertinent fact that a majority of people in both separatist republics are resolutely opposed to rejoining Georgia is consistently overlooked in the book. In over two hundred pages, this rather inconvenient truth is mentioned only once – in a single sentence by Stephen Blank. Out of eleven chapters, Thomas Goltz's historical overview alone offers hints as to why South Ossetians and Abkhazians resist reunification with Georgia. No other contributor ventures to point out that jingoism, racism and ethnic chauvinism are recurring and enduring features of Georgian political and social life. Rule from Tbilisi may have been unpopular in Soviet times; once Georgia became independent and free to mistreat its minorities with impunity, Georgian rule quickly became unbearable. This is not to suggest, of course, that ethnic Armenians, Ossetians or Abkhazians are necessarily more tolerant. The Abkhaz treatment of ethnic Georgians living in Gali is appalling, and Armenians have created what may be the most ethnically 'pure' country in the world. The fact that most people living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia today regard being bossed about by Medvedev's regime in Moscow as the lesser evil is testimony to how desperately unattractive the prospect of renewed Georgian dominance must seem to them.

For scholars and policy-makers alike, ignoring the aspirations of South Ossetians and Abkhazians and their leaders carries a heavy price. Just as Moscow mistakenly persists in regarding the regime in Tbilisi as a puppet show tightly orchestrated by America, the contributors to this volume seem to dismiss the possibility of independent volition and latitude for action by Tskhinvali and (especially) Sukhumi. The example of the successful reintegration of Adjara in early 2004 – which enjoyed the support of the majority of the local population, but was opposed by the local strongman and his backers in Moscow – cautions against completely ignoring or dismissing popular sentiment on the ground. Strong popular opposition in South Ossetia and Abkhazia to joining Georgia has significantly reduced the ability of local leaders to reach a compromise solution with Tbilisi.

2. A peaceful resolution of the conflict within a framework of Georgian sovereignty was never a realistic option.⁵ To assuage the fears of South Ossetians and Abkhazians of surrendering to Georgian rule, Tbilisi suggested constitutional frameworks incorporating wide-ranging autonomy and safeguards for constitutional rights. However, no recent Georgian leader has displayed much concern with keeping his promises, let alone those of his predecessors, and none of them has proved susceptible to external restraint by unwritten conventions, parliamentarians or constitutional safeguards.

This pattern was repeated after the Rose Revolution, when President Saakashvili and his inner circle concentrated power in their own hands, placed themselves above the rule of law, threw many beneficiaries of the old system into prison and/or seized their assets, redistributed public sector positions to members of their own networks, curtailed Adjara and local autonomy, curtailed civil liberties and hollowed out what was left of judiciary and media

⁵ Georgia's most realistic hope for a negotiated settlement was arguably to seek the partition of Abkhazia, with Georgia regaining the eastern part of the province in return for recognition of the status quo in the western part. President Saakashvili has confirmed that he suggested a solution along these lines to Russia in late June 2008. (<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19282>) His overture was rejected by Moscow; Tbilisi may have decided at that point that going to war offered the only hope of ever regaining its territories.

independence. As this reviewer has argued elsewhere, there were legitimate reasons for choosing this course of action at the time,⁶ but it reinforced a pre-existing commitment problem vis-à-vis Tskhinvali and Sukhumi: neither ordinary people nor the elites in the separatist republics could trust Tbilisi to honour a deal once Georgians had regained power on the ground. Sacrificing constitutional democracy and the rule of law in pursuit of a stronger state was successful in some regards, but it worked directly against Tbilisi's stated goal of reintegrating Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

3. Since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has been the main revisionist power in the region, actively opposing the status quo. Time was working against its claims to territories where most ethnic Georgians had been expelled nearly a generation ago, but the separatist republics – Abkhazia in particular – seemed as unlikely to voluntarily surrender their independence as ever. Undaunted, the Georgian leadership repeatedly and publicly promised its electorate a speedy return to the lost lands, at times even unilaterally setting specific dates.

In the meantime, a newly confident – and comparatively solvent – Tbilisi armed itself to the teeth. From 2004 onwards, Georgia was one of the most quickly militarizing countries in the world, with military expenditures rocketing from 0.5 percent to 8 percent of GDP.⁷ Incidentally, not a single contributor to the book mentions this massive Georgian arms build-up. (In contrast, several authors discuss Russia's escalating deployments of weapons and personnel.) Felgenhauer points out that Georgia's new doctrine and systems were not geared towards fighting a defensive war against Russia. In a report published in June 2008, the International Crisis Group noted that "Georgia remains determined to restore its territorial integrity, and hawks in Tbilisi are seriously considering a military option [...]. It [Georgia] has quietly been making military preparations."⁸

To conclude, "The Guns of August 2008" contains some excellent material, but its strong pro-Georgian bias often undermines the quality of its scholarship, at times blurring the line between fact and fiction. Those unfamiliar with the history, culture and politics of the South Caucasus should take care to complement this book with other readings in order to get a balanced picture of the issues at stake.

Sadly, they may face an uphill task. Too often, academic scholarship on the region focuses on western preoccupations and works through western frameworks such as civil society (usually ill-defined), democratization (which is not happening) and formal structures as they appear on paper (which are usually meaningless). In contrast, this reviewer has yet to read a single mention of President Saakashvili's widely rumoured mental illness, details about opposition leader Nino Burjanadze's business interests or an in-depth discussion of the role of the

⁶ Till Bruckner, "Decision-Making and Georgia's Perpetual Revolution: The Case of IDP Housing" *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3 (2), Spring 2009, 172-180. http://cria-online.org/7_5.html (accessed December 28, 2009). For a rival interpretation of the same developments that is much more critical of the ruling National Movement, see Irakly Areshidze, *Democracy and Autocracy in Eurasia: Georgia in Transition*, 2007 (Michigan: Michigan State University Press).

⁷ Uwe Halbach, "The Longer 'Countdown to War'": Growing Confrontation between Georgia and Russia 2004-2008," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 10, November 2, 2009, 2-4, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=109175> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁸ "Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia," *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report No. 193, June 5, 2008, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/europe/caucasus/193_georgia_and_russia_clashing_over_abkhazi_a.pdf (accessed December 22, 2009).

elusive but ever-present Rakeen corporation⁹. “Do you know what is *really* happening?” pundits in Tbilisi obsessively ask each other as soon as a new item comes up on the news, acutely aware that surface appearances and reality rarely match. Current scholarship¹⁰ on Georgia usually fails to answer that question.

⁹ Rakeen is a property development company backed by members of the ruling family of Ras Al Khaimah, a constituent emirate of the United Arab Emirates (www.rakeen.com). Rakeen first appeared on the radar in Georgia in 2007, when it announced plans to invest a total of USD 1.5 billion in the country (<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15261>). Rakeen acquired major assets seized from oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili when he fell from grace after supporting the November 2007 protests, including an amusement park and a controlling stake in the Imedi television channel (<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21703>). According to a foreign businessman based in Georgia, Rakeen’s investments in the country seem to “make no economic sense” (interview in Tbilisi, 2008). Georgia’s main sources of foreign direct investment in the first three quarters of 2009 were the United Arab Emirates (through Rakeen) and Egypt, the latter driven by the company Fresh Electric (www.fresh.com.eg). The Georgian government announced in April 2009 that Fresh planned to invest at least two billion dollars in Georgia (<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=20651>); at the time, Fresh Electric’s website put the company’s annual sales turnover at just USD 90 million. Due to the continued insecurity of large-scale property rights – as illustrated by the seizure of the properties of Patarkatsishvili and others – big investors cannot stay aloof from politics in Georgia, but their role is rarely explored in the literature.

¹⁰ For a refreshing exception to this rule, see Irakly Areshidze’s book (cited above).