Some Thoughts on Ronald Asmus' 'Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West' (Palgrave, 2010)

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It is now 21 years since my first intervention in the then-developing Georgian-Abkhazian crisis. Followers of news-releases on the Net for Abkhazia were reminded of this in late 2009 by a group calling themselves The Experts' Club, which, by their own admission, consists of former KGB officers from Georgia. I circulate their piece (with necessary correctives inserted) both to shew the low opinion in which I am held by many (?most) Georgians and to demonstrate the kind of responses one can expect, when daring to present arguments not wholly in accord with the perceived Georgian national project. Basically, then, I have been presenting variations on the same theme now for 21 years, and, since one often hears/reads that my motive stems from having an Abkhazian wife, let me put on public record at the outset that my wife actually advised me not to get involved back in the spring of 1989 before I popped my 'Open Letter to the Georgians' (as mentioned by the 'Experts') in the post to Tbilisi.

So, my chosen text for today's discussion is the book published earlier this year by Ronald D. Asmus, Executive Director of the Brussels-based Transatlantic Centre, 'A Little War that Shook the World'. I have already submitted a short critique to the Slavonic and East European Review, but there is much more that needs to be said.

When news first spread of fighting in/around S. Ossetia's capital, Tskhinval, late on 7th or early morning (local time) on 8th August 2008, the Georgian version of events quickly commanded worldwide acceptance, as news-outlets broadcast pictures of what they claimed was devastation in the Georgian town of Gori caused by the Russians, whereas the truth was that the devastation depicted was in Tskhinval and had been caused by Georgian shelling. Surely, people thought, the Georgian explanation of events, namely that Russia had launched an invasion, leaving President Mikheil (Misha) Saak'ashvili no alternative but to respond militarily, had to be correct, for after all it would have been inconceivable (dare one say madness?) for tiny Georgia to have provoked full-scale hostilities with its giant northern neighbour!. But, doubts soon began to grow, and, after the publication of the EU Report by Heidi Tagliavini's Commission on 30 September 2009, it was no longer possible to claim that Russia had fired the first shot on 7 August. Asmus, however, argues that it is not the first shot that matters, but the countdown to its being fired, and here he sees nothing but Russian responsibility, compounded by Western apathy.

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¹Whilst the confusion of Tskhinval with Gori on foreign news-channels could be put down to ignorance of relevant toponymy, Senator John McCain's PR-man Randy Scheunemann of Mercury Group was also under contract to Saak'ashvili and spun his master's case with enthusiasm.

Let's begin by considering Asmus' 'core argument', which he summarises towards the end of his book (pp. 215 ff.). This argument is twofold, being firstly: '[T]he origins of this war do not lie in the details of local ethnic rivalries between Georgians, on the one hand, and Abkhaz and South Ossetians, on the other'. On the contrary, it is precisely here where not only the origins for August 2008 but the root-causes of the two regional conflicts in general reside. And by treating the problem as essentially being between Georgia and Russia, one is depriving oneself of any chance of ever drawing sensible conclusions as to how the conflicts might finally be resolved². But, having settled on a wrong-headed premise, Asmus is led to the secondary leg of his argument, which is that: 'This war did not start on August 7, 2008. Nor was Moscow's aggression aimed solely at Georgia.' The West, he argues, had to be taught a lesson after recognising Kosovo in early 2008 in defiance of Moscow's objections and because of its entertainment, indeed encouragement, of Georgia's aspirations to sue for membership of NATO, the presence of which organisation on Russia's southern flank was totally anathema to the Kremlin.

It is, of course, true that Moscow resented the decision over Kosovo, and hopes were high in Abkhazia during the summer of 2007 that, as soon as the anticipated recognition was offered, Russia would respond by immediately recognising Abkhazia (and S. Ossetia). Interestingly, this did not happen, though on 6 March 2008 Russia withdrew from the CIS sanctions' regime (in force since 1996) and established a closer association at the level of government-departments. Although there was disappointment that Russia did not act as had been hoped, some counselled that ideally Russia should not be the first to offer recognition, as this would only serve as a red rag to Georgia's bull and seem to lend credence to the familiar Georgian charge that Russia was ultimately fuelling the conflicts. Predictably, this is basically Asmus' position, for he constantly speaks of 'the two separatist provinces largely controlled by Russia and its separatist proxies...In practice, these enclaves were run largely by Moscow's military and intelligence services' (p. 4). Take another example: 'It was not unprecedented for Moscow to use Abkhaz or South Ossetian separatists as pawns to keep Tbilisi off balance' (p. 28). He also urges readers not 'to forget how hostile Moscow was to Saakashvili's predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze' (p. 217). And the Abkhazian victory in the war of 1992-93 could not have been achieved without 'Russian force' or 'the support of elements of the Russian military' (p. 62). I specifically asked the American Dodge Billingsley to address the issue of Russian involvement in the war when preparing his contribution to my edited 'The Abkhazians: a Handbook' (Curzon Press, 1999), and his conclusion was that, despite

²British Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, was one of those who flew to Georgia to offer support. In a live interview from Tbilisi for BBC's Newsnight lasting about 5 minutes not once did he mention S. Ossetia or the South Ossetians, who had been the targets of the Georgian attack.

there being verified cases of Russian assistance, such as the shooting down of Russian pilots, a fact naturally highlighted by Asmus, 'the incidents were isolated and more likely reflected freelancing by rogue elements of the Russian military' (1999.155). Asmus rather undermines his own case, however, when recording the motive for Saak'ashvili's determination to strengthen his military: that aim was 'that Georgia would never again be easily defeated by a ragtag separatist militia, as it had been in the early 1990s' (pp. 77-8)! When it suits his argument, Asmus also forgets the fact that for most of the post-war 1990s Abkhazia was subjected to firstly a Russian and then CIS blockade (including restrictions on who/what could cross the Russo-Abkhazian border over the R. Psou) along with economic sanctions, designed to pressure the Abkhazian leadership, under the late Vladislav Ardzinba, to agree to some sort of (con)federation with Georgia, hardly typical of a chess-player-and-pawn relationship.

[N.B. there appears to be a terminological confusion here: Asmus speaks of Georgia being prepared to offer 'far-reaching autonomy in some loose confederation' (p. 65). Had pre-war Georgia been prepared to contemplate and debate, as it should have done, radical restructuring along federal lines for its post-Soviet existence, this just MIGHT have avoided war in Abkhazia, but, after the war and given that Georgia was now an independent state, the best (sc. from a Georgian perspective) that the Abkhazians were prepared to consider was CONfederation, but this always proved unacceptable to Tbilisi, as CONfederation, defined as allowing either partner to dissolve the union, was seen there as a stepping-stone for the Abkhazians to achieve full independence by a route Tbilisi could not then challenge. So, when Asmus talks of 'loose confederation', what he means is, according to these definitions, 'loose FEDeration'. Readers of the book should be aware of this terminological disparity, for, had Georgia been prepared to consider CONfederal relations with Abkhazia prior to its declaration of independence on 12 October 1999, subsequent problems MIGHT have been avoided.]

Hot on the heels of the Kosovo decision came the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2008), where, I agree with Asmus, a major blunder was committed. BUT Asmus' blunder is not mine. Asmus was a long-time advocate of NATO expansion, and so it is not hard to guess what he thinks should have happened. George W. Bush³ arrived in Bucharest with the proposal that Georgia and The Ukraine be granted membership. Commentators will probably long debate the wisdom of tabling such a

³Bush had visited Tbilisi in the spring of 2006 to a hero's welcome — Saak'ashvili even named a thoroughfare in his honour. Saak'ashvili had already captivated the likes of George Soros, John McCain and Richard Holbrooke; McCain and Hillary Clinton had even nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize [sic!] in January 2005 (Asmus p. 58), all of which raises serious doubts about the political acumen of these powerful players on the international scene.

proposal in general, regardless of what one thinks about the particularities of the Georgian and Ukrainian cases. Bush's suggestion had some support (including, of course, from the UK), but it was clear that the proposition would fail because of opposition from more perspicacious members. Though it seems that Bush himself was ready simply to withdraw and move on, the tenacity of certain former Easternbloc members, conditioned by (fully understandable) anti-Russian sentiments, to ensure that something positive be done for the states in question resulted in the promise to reassess the matter at the December summit, when a Membership Action Plan (MAP) could be offered. One can plausibly take this as the start of the countdown to war, but, whereas Asmus argues that Russia was the prime actor in order to thwart Georgia's NATO ambitions, I would counter that it was more important to Saak'ashvili to 'solve' the territorial disputes in order to be able to present Georgia as a state whose integrity was no longer violated and, incidentally, to fulfil his election-promises (twice enunciated) to return the lost territories within his presidential term. Whilst Asmus lays charges against Russia, there are clues littered throughout his text that things might not be so straightforward, and I now turn to the counter-charge.

The late Viktor Popkov's contribution to my aforementioned Curzon book makes clear that the fatal clashes in Abkhazia in July 1989 were premeditated by the Georgian side. Who was responsible for initiating hostilities that speedily led to war in S. Ossetia at the turn of 1990-91? It was Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Who was responsible for initiating the war in Akhazia on 14 August 1992? It was the Georgian State Council, headed by Eduard Shevardnadze. Which side attempted to reignite the conflagration in Abkhazia in May 1998? It was the Georgians. Which side attempted to resolve the S. Ossetian stand-off by force of arms in 2004? It was Saak'ashvili's Georgia. Can one point to any Russian military aggression against Georgia since the establishment of Soviet power by the Red Army in 1921? I think not. The pattern, then, is unarguable.

Now, although Asmus observes that 'Georgia was upgrading its defenses with the help of Israel and Ukraine', he nowhere gives the figures; the defence-budget increased from \$36 million in 2003 to \$990 million in 2008 (Kvarchelia, Istanbul conference May 2009). Despite this, wherever Asmus addresses Georgia's military capability, he downplays its significance in terms of: manpower, equipment, training, battle-readiness, all designed to imply that Saak'ashvili would never voluntarily start a shooting war. But this line of argument is again undermined by comments in his own book, such as: 'Building Georgian military strength was one way to reduce Russia's asymmetrical position and strengthen his [MS]. He wanted the Russians to know that, if they provoked a fight with him, he was capable of fighting back' (p. 78).

Even more striking in this regard, however, are the following citations of Georgian braggadocio garnered by Emil' Pain (2009.11), himself quoting them from Jashlavskij (2008). The first comes from Saak'ashvili himself: 'Never has Georgia been so strong as it is today. It has never had such an opportunity to defend the unity of the state or such a disciplined and well-trained army. Today we can fight any adversary'. The second is from Chairman of the Georgian Parliament's Defence & Security Cte., Givi Targamadze: 'Even the Russian army does not have such disciplined and well-oiled elements. The Georgian army is much better than the Russian army'. And the third is from Irak'li Okruashvili, Georgian Defence Minister at the time (= 2004): 'Russia is doomed to defeat in the event of war with Georgia... We are ready to go into battle as soon as tomorrow'. Well, perhaps, as Pain states, the Georgian leadership was convinced by its own rhetoric. But the real suspicion all along was that the military build-up was directed at attaining one specific goal: recapturing the lost territories by force, and both the size of Georgia's military, trained by the Americans and others⁴, and the quantity of weaponry acquired posed a significant threat to the defencecapabilities of the Abkhazian and S. Ossetian forces. And that plans existed for attacks in both regions are beyond doubt - Asmus' own references to them are legion, though he avoids any mention of the testimony at the Georgian parliamentary hearings into the war of August 2008 provided on 26 November 2008 by Erosi Kitsmarishvili, Georgia's former Ambassador to Russia. The New York Times reported it thus: 'A former confidant of President Mikheil Saakashvili, Mr. Kitsmarishvili, said Georgian officials told him in April that they planned to start a war in Abkhazia, one of two breakaway regions at issue in the war, and had received a green light from the United States government to do so. He said the Georgian government later decided to start the war in South Ossetia, the other region, and continue into Abkhazia.'

Asmus accurately sums up Saak'ashvili's attitude to President Bagapsh's Abkhazian government: 'The Abkhaz leadership was not interested in political dialogue with Tbilisi and, he [MS] continued, they were just a bunch of criminals anyway. Negotiating with them was hopeless' (p. 142). The negotiating process was broken off by Bagapsh following the deployment in May 2006 by Saak'ashvili of troops into the Upper K'odor Valley, the one part of Abkhazia that remained under Tbilisi's control after the 1992-93 war, on the pretext of effecting a policing operation. This was in contravention of the 1994 Moscow ceasefire agreement. The situation was later aggravated by the provocative relocating there from Tbilisi of the so-called Abkhazian Government-in-Exile. An enormous amount of weaponry was

⁴Asmus and others plaintively assert that the training, to prepare Georgian troops for service in Iraq and eventual NATO membership, was for non-offensive purposes only, though I do not understand how this fits with Georgian participation in NATO manoeuvres over the years.

then stock-piled there (for the inventory see Hewitt.2008). No-one has ever explained why that weaponry was needed. Asmus dismisses the idea that an assault on lowland Abkhazia could have been mounted from there by Georgian 'armed police units' (p. 148), but those offering similar apologias (e.g. Lt.-Col. Bob Hamilton) forget that it was precisely from here that a band of Chechen mercenaries under Ruslan Gelaev, ferried into the valley under Georgian government supervision in the time of Shevardnadze, had mounted an attack on such villages as Naa in October 2001 and indeed had downed a UNOMIG helicopter, killing nine on board. Buttressing the alarm at the Georgian military presence in the K'odor Valley, a Mingrelian, Davit Sigua, who was a member of the local electoral commission in the Gal District, was abducted in February 2007, never to be seen again. And so, the conditions set by Bagapsh for resumption of negotiations were: (a) removal of the illegally stationed troops from the K'odor; (b) explanation of the whereabouts and/or what had happened to Sigua⁵; (c) signing of a non-use-of-force agreement. Not one of these conditions has ever been satisfied, though developments in the K'odor will be discussed later.

If Saak'ashvili's plans for attacks on the disputed territories were well-known to his Western friends (including the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt (p. 143)), who, Asmus repeatedly emphasises (perhaps protesting a tad too much?), urged him to abandon them, is it any surprise that they were also known to the Abkhazians, Ossetians and the Russians? Abkhazia was expecting an assault in the spring of 2008. It is, therefore, natural that preemptive measures should have been taken, such as the upgrading of the rather derelict railtrack from the capital Sukhum to Ochamchira and Gal in the south-east, and indeed the upgraded track was utilised during the August hostilities. Asmus, predictably, points an accusing finger at this anticipatory work. He is silent about parallel moves on the Georgian side of the border. Consider the (understandably anonymous) report 'Georgian War Footing Takes Concrete Form — Literally' (at www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=article&id=2733&lang=en) from 19 May 2008. Two foreigners, well-versed in military matters, along with a Mingrelian refugee strolled towards the border with Abkhazia on 9 May and noticed something rather interesting. The track had been upgraded (by foreign, high-quality labour, according to local informants) and beside it near the border was a strengthened concrete-platform, shewn in Ian Carver's accompanying photo, obviously designed to facilitate the off-loading of tanks. The report concluded: 'The presence of on-going or near complete military infrastructure being professionally constructed in close proximity to the border demonstrates that Georgia is actually preparing for war against Abkhazia'. When Matthew Bryza, Condoleezza Rice's representative for the

⁵Everybody knows he is dead.

Caucasus, visited Sukhum in the summer of 2008, he commented to a senior politician that, unless Abkhazia resumed talks with Tbilisi, a 'hot August' might be expected. This was immediately interpreted as indicating that the US knew that unpleasantness was in prospect, and the answer given was: 'We Abkhazians have lived through hot Augusts before and can do so again'. Around the same time, when the EU's foreign emissary Javier Solana was leaving Tbilisi, he was overheard remarking: 'These crazy Georgians are likely to start a war.' As Kitsmarishvili revealed, S. Ossetia became at the last minute the primary target, probably because it was felt to be too insignificant for the Russians to bother defending. Had victory been achieved in S. Ossetia, Abkhazia would assuredly have been next.

But Saak'ashvili's gamble failed (rather more swiftly than the failure of Shevardnadze's gamble in invading Abkhazia on 14 August 1992). Russia's 58th Army had been on manoeuvres in the North Caucasus, of which much is made by Asmus, though again he says nothing about Georgia's participation in NATO manoeuvres around the same time. If Russia had, as charged, been minded to fight, why did their UN Ambassador, Vitalij Churkin, try to get Security Council agreement on a ceasefire in the early hours (Caucasian time) of 8 August only to be blocked by the US and UK representatives? And what could have been the motives of these champions of peace, freedom and democracy?!

Learning of the battle in/around Tskhinval on Friday 8 August, Abkhazia's population, which included the present writer, wondered if we too would be subjected to a similar bombardment. Over the weekend, as a general mobilisation was announced⁶, the Georgian troops in the K'odor were softened up by bombing. The Abkhazians then decided to minimise casualties by giving them 24 hours to vacate the Valley and cross into Svanetia (Georgia). Exclusively Abkhazian ground-forces moved up the Valley at dawn on Tuesday 12 August and found to their amazement that the troops (along with the bulk of the local Svan residents) had simply fled, abandoning weapons, equipment, uniforms, passports etc... One computer was found to contain photographs (soon placed in the public domain) depicting men in US military fatigues demonstrating to a class of Georgians how to make improvised explosive devices. In Chkhalta a small building was found carrying the sign (in English!) 'NATO Information Centre'; another placard read (in Georgian) 'Our goal is nigh!' (clearly not a reference to the little football pitch that had been erected for the troops' entertainment). In Azhara a branch of Zugdidi Bank had even been opened. Other detachments, consisting of Russians and Abkhazians, crossed the R. Ingur into Georgia and found that troops there too had melted away. They moved into the military base at Senak'i and either removed (to Abkhazia) threatening materials or

⁶Note that there had been no such call prior to Georgia's actions in S. Ossetia.

destroyed them, though what information the 40 or so computers also captured might have contained has never been revealed. There was no mistreatment of the local Mingrelian population and no plundering of property, though the youth-camp provocatively built by Saak'ashvili in May 2006 beside the border in Ganmukhuri was razed to the ground. Six naval vessels that could threaten Abkhazia's coastline were sunk in the port of Poti, and Russian military ships, flying both the Russian and Abkhazian flags, became popular visitors to the quay in Sukhum bay. The Gori military base controlling access to S. Ossetia was similarly neutralised, but properties in Georgian settlements brought under Ossetian control were torched, causing a new flood of refugees. Unlike the mostly Mingrelians who had fled from Abkhazia in 1993 and have largely been left to cope with little central support, these Georgian refugees were quickly provided with newly and speedily built houses. Ossetians who had fought on the Georgian side were executed as traitors.

Some took/take the view that, had Russia simply pushed the Georgian troops out of S. Ossetia (and maybe even the K'odor Valley?) back to the ceasefire-line and stopped there, they could have claimed the moral high ground. But that would have left Georgia's military capacity more or less intact, and, given the precedents, Saak'ashvili (or some similarly inclined successor) would no doubt have been tempted in due course to essay the military option. The worry is that this option might still be under consideration. The Geneva Process, established after the events of August 2008, is the only venue where all sides still regularly meet, and the Georgians adamantly continue their refusal to sign a non-use-of-force agreement with either Tskhinval or Sukhum. And on 17 March 2010 the Russian newspaper Nezavisimaja Gazeta reported that, although Georgia's GDP fell by \$1 billion in 2008-9, defencespending is now the highest of the current/former CIS states at 4.56% of GDP. Though Russia's percentage expenditure is the lowest among those states, it is increasing outlays in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia to counter any future Georgian démarche. Though the US evidently stopped providing 'lethal defence articles' to Georgia after the 2008 war, a report to the Foreign Relations Cte. commissioned by Sen. Richard Lugar ('Striking the Balance: US Policy and Stability in Georgia', 22 Dec 2009) recommends a coordinated strategy for the region including regional arms sales, a worrying sign that the same mistakes as in the recent past are going to be repeated.

Asmus accepts that July-August was something of a traditional 'shooting season' along the S. Ossetian-Georgian ceasefire line (p. 25). But for him the 2008 seasonal event was intensified by the Ossetians/Russians deliberately to provoke the Georgians so that they could be slapped down. Well, even if one is minded to be so persuaded, one still has to ask: 'Is it actually conceivable that Russia would have moved against

Georgia, if Saak'ashvili had not ordered his troops into action?' Asmus talks of Saak'ashvili fearing Russian occupation of the two disputed territories, but the regions concerned had been de facto independent of Georgia for almost two decades when the war began, and so what would Russia have gained, apart from international opprobrium for an unprovoked land-grab? That contumely came in any event, especially after President Dmitry Medvedev's recognition of the two republics on 26 August 2008. No-one should be so naive as to suppose that Russia acted as it did in August 2008 out of altruism; Putin openly admitted this on his visit to Sukhum in August 2009. Russia has its own interests and is naturally pursuing them. There are those who argue that its recognition of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia might have negative repercussions in some parts of the Russian Federation (and Georgia at the moment seems to be playing a dangerous game of trying to foment trouble in the North Caucasus), but that has not happened. On the contrary, there are reports that Moscow has earned respect for acting in defence of threatened minorities, improving the image it has severely tarnished with its catastrophic policy in Chechenia. And swimming against the tide of international criticism of the Kremlin, Nicolai Petro has recently presented a legal justification for Russia's 2008 intervention (2009), which suggests that the case is not as clear-cut as most assume.

It is unimaginable that, after everything that has happened, the Abkhazians or South Ossetians will ever willingly subordinate themselves to Tbilisi. The policy pursued by Georgia and its Western allies since the collapse of the USSR has achieved the precise opposite of what it was designed to achieve, namely the return of Sukhum and Tskhinval to Tbilisi's orbit. Policy henceforth should be predicated on reality and not self-delusion; whilst time is wasted discussing with Saak'ashvili and minister Temur Yak'obashvili irrelevant Reintegration Strategies, Russia remains the only source for lucrative investments in Abkhazia. I have stated before and will repeat here that all three Transcaucasian hot-spots (Abkhazia, S. Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabagh) should be formally recognised by the international community (including and indeed principally by Georgia and Azerbaijan). All six Transcaucasian states should then be encouraged to work towards establishing a regional common market of a type that will allow for the participation of larger regional players such as Turkey, Russia and, yes, even Iran. Each of the new republics should be given international guarantees of security. Only in some such way will stability be achieved in this blighted region and chances created for a gradual resolution of the problem of refugees, as ethnic groups rediscover their ability to live together. If cooperation proves impossible, the obvious solution for S. Ossetia is union with N. Ossetia within the Russian Federation, whilst Abkhazia is in the best position of the three hot-spots to make a success of independence, given its natural resources and potential for tourism; indeed, contrary to those who conclude there were no winners from August 2008, Abkhazia most assuredly did: with only a single (Abkhazian) death, no part of its territory is in foreign hands, and it has achieved (small but growing) recognition. Obstinate pursuit of failed policies can only lead to continuing instability and possible repetition of armed conflict with all the human misery and suffering that entails.

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