

Wheatley, Jonathan. Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union. Ashgate, Aldershot, England, and Burlington, USA, 2005. viii + 252 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. £55.00.

FINDING not a single Georgian-language source listed in the Bibliography, I approached this work with some apprehension, but the text is reassuringly comprehensive in its account of the period under review and (mostly) judicious in its judgements. However, some explanation of the transcription employed would have been useful and might have helped the author avoid some inconsistencies. For instance, Georgia's south-western province of Ach'ara (the apostrophe marking glottalisation) becomes Adjara, but the surname Ch'ant'uria appears simply as Chanturia; the movement Ch'q'ondideli is rendered Chkhondideli, though the surname Q'arq'arashvili emerges as Karkarashvili. Naturally, such linguistic infelicities will not trouble most readers, who will probably be absorbed in what is virtually a manual on how not to build a functioning state, following the steps by which Georgia's three successive leaders (the late Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, Mikheil Saak'ashvili) have managed in the space of twenty years to ruin what was probably the most prosperous and vibrant of the USSR's fifteen union-republics. The book was apparently completed in early 2005, when Saak'ashvili was only a year into his first term, well before his mismanagement brought disaster on his people (not to mention South Ossetia) in August 2008 and caused plaintive calls from oppositionists about the country's continuing lack of democracy. This explains why the final assessment is less damning than would be anticipated today, even allowing for his high-profile crackdown on corruption and reigning in the notorious bribe-taking traffic-police: '[T]he development of democracy...depends to a large extent on society's own capacity to define its own interests and to act in their defence — a capacity which, as we have observed, remained weak in Georgia. On whether progress is being made in this direction, the jury is still out' (p.226).

Needing a theory against which to frame his narrative, Jonathan Wheatley defines what he means by a regime thus: 'A regime is defined by a) the diversity and characteristics of those actors who belong to the political elite as well as the rules, both informal and formal, that govern decision-making within the elite, b) the capacity of the political elite to penetrate society either by means of repression or by legitimization of one form or another, and c) the extent to which ordinary individuals and social forces independent of the state are able to influence state decision-making' (pp.3-4). He then defines the key challenge for the book as '[u]nderstanding how and why political regimes change and the way structures and actors interact to bring about institutional change' (p.7); relevant too are 'critical phases'.

The tragedy of 9th April 1989, when Russian troops violently dispersed demonstrators paralysing the centre of Tbilisi, is one defining moment — twenty died. Though Georgian intolerance towards non-Georgians was already well entrenched, this event certainly buttressed the growth of nationalism. From the late 1980s Georgia has witnessed endless sequences of creation, fragmentation, breakup of, and realignments among, a mind-boggling number of political movements and parties, which Wheatley meticulously charts. Though the period 1989-95, which saw the rise and fall of Gamsakhurdia, wars in S. Ossetia, Mingrelia and Abkhazia, and the entrenchment of Shevardnadze (in the guise of born-again christian) as Georgian leader, is deemed one of transition, democracy did not result (p.69).

After winning the 1995 presidential election, Shevardnadze strengthened the Ministry of Internal Affairs (his original power-base before becoming Party Boss in 1972) and stood atop a pyramid of institutionalised corruption (p.107) that benefited his own family (p.112). Apparent political pluralism 'had little to do with democracy' being 'not democratic pluralism, but bureaucratic pluralism' (p.134). All (Washington especially) who have shewn (or continue to shew) themselves so gullible to Georgian blandishments should note this salutary assessment, which, though applied to the late 1990s, is still relevant: 'While shamelessly pursuing his own private goals, in public the Georgian official would use the rhetoric of democracy and the free market in much the same way as his predecessors (or even himself) had previously parroted communist slogans. However, this rhetoric was more designed to convince the international donor community than to win an increasingly cynical Georgian public' (p.130), or again: '[T]he publicly-espoused political platform of parties should be understood as no more than window dressing, devised to convince the population that the party really cared for them or to show western governments that Georgia really was democratic' (p.158).

Wheatley's treatment of the Abkhazian and S. Ossetian conflicts sometimes too readily reflects the Georgian perspective. One example must suffice: he accepts that the National Guard leader Tengiz K'it'ovani was responsible for sparking the Abkhazian war by entering the capital Sukhum 'when his mandate was merely to establish control over the railways and highways' (p.73). The only problem with this (widely accepted) interpretation is that attacks on rail-traffic in 1992 were taking place not in Abkhazia but in Mingrelia, where a civil war with the Zviadists was in progress. However, Wheatley rightly concludes that 'it was an internal factor...that provided the pretext for the war in Abkhazia. Russia merely exploited the state of affairs' (p.224).

Overall, this is a valuable source of depressing facts on Georgia in the late-Soviet/early independent years. The judgement on the first year of Saak'ashvili's presidency, namely 'Saakasvhili's insistence on reintegrating the breakaway regions

risked unleashing a dangerous conflict that could easily involve Russia' (p.209), proved all too prescient. However, if I have a reservation, it is Wheatley's reliance on the force of determinism, when he asserts that, after the 9th April 1989, 'any leader of...the Georgian opposition would have been constrained to take exactly the same uncompromising position as Gamsakhurdia' (p.61) or that 'the Abkhaz war was a final, tragic and inevitable consequence of the 9 April massacre' (p.73). This is too facile an excuse. The Abkhazian war was completely avoidable, had only Tbilisi been ready to discuss the proposals tabled by Sukhum for talks on new (con)federal relations. What was needed in the late 1980s was a dose of common sense. If no-one in Georgia could see this, then that society deserves condemnation for its collective lack of wisdom; if some did see the need but chose to remain silent, then it remains both for individuals to address their failure of moral courage and for society to ponder why such such individuals were afraid to speak their mind.

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