

*Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. By Anatoly Isaenko. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 2011. 418 Pages.

Twenty two years had passed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, one of the most dramatic geopolitical events of the second half of the 20th century. This cataclysmic transformation was associated with and driven by the immense explosion of ethnic conflicts in many of the former republics of the USSR. Nowhere were such conflicts as numerous and violent as in the historically turbulent region of the Caucasus. Anatoly Isaenko's book, *Polygon of Satan*, examines the origins and the dynamics of these conflicts skillfully intertwining narratives of grand political processes and testimonies of witnesses at the micro-level. The author focuses on four episodes of ethno-political contention in the Caucasus: the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the Russo-Chechen conflict, and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in and around Nagorny Karabakh. The amount of historical detail he provides is overwhelming, the stories are staggering, and the general conclusion is unambiguous: history matters.

The author begins his narrative by challenging simplistic explanations of ethnic conflicts developed within conventional frameworks of power politics or territorial disputes. According to him, the conflicts in the Caucasus encompass disputes around a much broader set of issues including such phenomena as shared history, national territory, kinship, folk culture, language, commensality, and religion. As an ethno-national project involving development of an ethnic group into a nation-state in a context of a larger imperial state unfolds, these components of ethnicity are challenged or infringed upon by other ethnic groups and/or the imperial power. The collective memory of an ethnic group accumulates episodes of oppression, persecution, and injustice inflicted by other groups. When the latent phase of an ethno-political contention turns into a manifest (or a "hot") stage, ethnic traumas resurface and turn into a powerful force dividing communities into mutually hostile enclaves and fueling ethnic violence.

The book shows the extreme complexity of the current ethno-political entanglements in the region. Consider the Russo-Georgian military conflict in South Ossetia in August of 2008, which caused much consternation in the

Western media. In the nineteenth century, South Ossetia was a small ethnic district, populated by an ethnic group of Ossetians within a Georgian-Imereti province of the Russian empire. During a brief period of independence in 1918-1921, Georgia attempted to incorporate South Ossetia into a new nation, which provoked the Ossetians' uprising in 1920, suppressed by the Georgian troops. Since 1922, Georgia was a union republic in the USSR, whereas South Ossetia was an ethnic district within Georgia. Ethnic conflicts between Georgians and Ossetians barely existed in the Soviet period. The weakening of the federal Soviet state in the late 1980s resulted in a renewed Georgian quest for the national independence. South Ossetians had declared autonomy within Georgia. In response the Georgian troops began their onslaught on South Ossetia in 1989 opening the first "hot stage" of the confrontation (1989-1992). This phase ended with a peace settlement during the summer of 1992, which stipulated the deployment of an international peacekeeping force consisting of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian troops. At the next, "smoldering phase" (1993 to August 2008), the territory, protected by the Russian troops, began to gravitate toward Russia. In August of 2008, Georgia attempted to reestablish its military control over the district, which triggered an immediate response by the Russian army that forced the Georgians to retreat. Thus, South Ossetia represents a geopolitical conundrum. On the one hand, it is a territory located within Georgia and, according to the Georgians, should be a part of this nation. On the other hand, the majority of the population in the enclave, South Ossetians, always resisted being a part of an independent Georgia, accepting an autonomous status within Georgia only if Georgia itself was a part of the larger Russian/Soviet state.

As this example suggests, there are grounds to believe that the deepest ethnic trauma inflicted upon the people of the region was the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. A strong multiethnic state providing equal opportunities to its citizens regardless of race or ethnicity is the best protector against ethnic strife and violence. In the Soviet Union, the ethnic divisions were blurred as long as its citizens were integrated within a powerful supranational community – the Soviet people. According to the communist version of a melting pot ideology, the socialist society in the USSR was evolving toward a merging of nationalities and ethnic groups. In the 1960s-70s, most citizens thought of themselves as Soviets first, and as Ukrainians or Armenians second (if not third, or tenth...). The resurfacing of ethnic identities and ethnic

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traumas in the 1980s-90s was a result of the weakening and dissolution of the supranational identity of the Soviet people.

There are reasons to view the ethno-political contention in the Caucasus as unique. This is a region rich in century-old traditions and customs, located at the fringes of several civilizations. The patriarchal mountaineer culture permeated by the notions of honor, solidarity, warrior pride, and preserving such exotic rituals as blood brotherhood and blood revenge fascinates ethnographers and anthropologists. Yet, for a better grasp of the dynamics of ethno-political contention in former multinational states, bringing in a broader, comparative perspective may be informative. It is intriguing to see if the patterns and regularities in ethno-political mobilization and contention identified in this study may be detected outside the Caucasus. The civil war in the former Yugoslavia may serve an appropriate comparable case. At any rate, *Polygon of Satan* is an extraordinary piece of research rewarding an inquisitive mind with a wealth of information and theoretical insight about the intricate ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus.

Pavel Osinsky  
Appalachian State University  
Boone, NC, USA