

The Russo–Georgian War and the War in Donbas: Is History Repeating Itself?

Written by Matt Finucane

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MATT FINUCANE, MAY 15 2015

Beginning with a historical account, addressing the disparate circumstances of Georgia and Ukraine following the breakup of the USSR, this essay will argue that their wars of 2008 and 2014 nevertheless bear a significant resemblance. Each was triggered primarily by Russian strategic concerns—often relating to the Black Sea—and more broadly by the fear that encroaching military and economic alliances would sap Russian influence in its ‘near abroad’. Differences between the conflicts tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative, and reflect the divergent domestic circumstances in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as the changing nature of East–West relations and world order throughout the 21st Century.

From Brotherhood to Belligerence

Long suppressed under Soviet rule, nationalism soon became the definitive political force across the former Soviet Union (FSU). Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Georgia, where nationalism “came to play an institutional and aggressive role earlier than elsewhere” (Smith, 2013, p.341). An unforeseen consequence of Georgia’s enthusiastically nationalist leadership was the alienation of its minority groups—the Ossetians, Abkhaz, and Adjars—whose views the government “made little effort to accommodate” (Lucas, 2012, p.115). For the Abkhaz in particular, this was an extreme contrast with the Soviet era—“one of the few clear cases of a deliberate divide-and-rule policy”—when because of their strategically significant Black Sea port in Sukhumi, Abkhazia reaped Soviet favour as a “useful counterweight to Georgia” (Smith, 2013, p.344).

Strategic concerns will remain significant henceforth, so it is worth drawing some distinctions between Russian and Western military and security services that were particularly acute during the 1990s. Firstly, the differences between Soviet and Russian security services are mostly “cosmetic”; despite reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin alike, these institutions retained most of their Soviet capabilities, albeit redistributed between the Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and Russian military intelligence, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (Albats, 1995, p.355). Secondly, whilst Western agencies were bound, however loosely, by law and democratic accountability, Soviet and Russian security services were “a partisan body, a political institution operating in a complete legal vacuum” (Albats, 1995, p.22). This was only exacerbated by the chaos of the 1990s, and that Yeltsin was so rarely aware of what his military was doing surprised only Western diplomats (Watt, 1999).

Russia’s relationship with its ‘near abroad’ was nevertheless unequivocal. As Aleksandr Lebed, commander of Russia’s 14th Army in Moldova and a critic of Yeltsin said, “the interests of the state must be defended” (Shevtsova, 2000, p.49). Whether orders came from Moscow or from local commanders, Russian forces engaged in each of the FSU’s conflicts, defending *their* (as much as their *state’s*) strategic enclaves whilst intelligence services lent generous support to minorities resisting “the political claims of the titular nationalities” throughout the FSU (Goldman, Lapidus, and Zaslavsky, 1992, p.12).

In Georgia, the GRU played a key role in arming and training Abkhaz and South Ossetian forces (Lucas, 2012, p.115). When Georgian troops entered Abkhazia in August 1992 seeking to reassert authority over the wayward

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province, they were cleverly pushed into Russian territory, precipitating a significant Russian intervention (Smith, 2013, p.347). A Georgian commander claimed in frustration that though the separatist forces could conceivably be defeated in days, “Russian planes are bombing us. Russian units are firing on our positions” and “Russian generals are threatening us”—all without formal declarations from Moscow (Toft, 2003, p.105). Russian forces would *officially* enter the conflict only after they had won it, acting as peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Few attempts were made to reconcile minority and Georgian interests, thereby illustrating the political motive for Russian intervention. The conflict had been ‘frozen’ to guarantee access to the Sukhumi port, whilst cementing Russian influence in Georgia; nevertheless, the failure to achieve an equitable settlement would contribute significantly to the 2008 Russo–Georgian War (Smith, 2013, p.343).

Ukraine weathered the stormy nationalism of the 1990s with less trouble. Ukrainian nationalism “is a powerful rallying cry in Galicia”, and its rivalry with Russian nationalism (and Soviet nostalgia) in Ukraine’s east *can* escalate to violence, as happened in May 2011 when Russian veterans of the Second World War were attacked by nationalists of the right-wing Svoboda party (Wilson, 2009, p.172; Korostelina, 2014, p.56). Nevertheless, (Crimea aside) even amidst war conditions only 4% in Ukraine’s most secessionist quarter (the east) support separatism (International Republican Institute, 2014). Even more significantly, each nationalism has only limited appeal beyond its respective fortress, and so relies heavily on Ukraine’s ‘centrist’, non-party oligarchy (or *vlast*) for support (Wilson, 2009, p.173).

The connections between this authority and its Russian counterpart, coupled with the signing of the Black Sea Fleet Pact in 1997[1], meant that Russian interests in Ukraine were never seriously threatened (Anderson and Albini, 2010, p.296). Though this situation was far from perfect (and Russia’s reluctance to mortgage its security to Ukraine was matched only by Ukraine’s discomfort at accommodating a permanent Russian military force), Russia was confident enough that neighbourly relations would endure that it agreed to pay an exorbitant price for the lease (Anderson and Albini, 2010, p.296). Perhaps the most significant factor in this confidence is the enduring relationship between Russian and Ukrainian institutional power.

Historically, the Ukrainian Committee for State Security (KGB) had been “Moscow’s chief vehicle for maintaining political control over Ukraine and for suppressing Ukrainian nationalism” (Knight, 1996, p.150). A similar relationship survived the Soviet collapse, and the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) was swiftly and thoroughly penetrated by Russian intelligence (Galeotti, 2014). In 2010, 35% of its employees were Russians, trained in and retaining contacts with Moscow, whilst that same year an FSB–SBU cooperation protocol had been agreed allowing Russia to recruit agents from within the Ukrainian government (Anderson and Albini, 2010, p.283).

This influence manifested in a mixture of threats and inducements, and as in Russia, organised crime has been an indispensable tool, both to reward co-operation and to generally “obstruct, disrupt, interfere with, and undermine the development of sustainable capitalism and democracy in Ukraine”—to safeguard its preferred environment (Anderson and Albini, 2010, p.288). KGB files, stolen during the collapse of the USSR, provide ample material with which to blackmail SBU officers and their contacts, and further archives were extensively ransacked following the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 (Anderson and Albini, 2010, p.283; Miller, 2014). The consequence of such efforts is that whether pro-Western or pro-Russian forces took charge, Russian influence over the ‘centrist’ kingmakers—the forces of “stagnation, corruption and the growing abuse of [state power]”—remained inviolate (Wilson, 2009, p.173). As will be demonstrated, it was the removal of Yanukovich *coupled* with the distant fear of losing Crimea that led events in February 2014 to be deemed an immediate threat to Russian interests thereby precipitating Russian intervention.

Mounting Pressures

Two long-term and interconnected trends exacerbated relations between Russia and its ‘near abroad’ and made war in Georgia and Ukraine significantly more likely: the souring of relations between Russia and the West, and the enlargement of the European Union and NATO. Though the belief had been that, following the end of the Cold War, a new era of peace and cooperation would emerge—epitomised by Presidential candidate, Bill Clinton’s overtures to “a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march”—realities of power distribution soon became apparent (Clinton, 1992). What was christened the ‘unipolar moment’, indicative of America’s “decisive preponderance in *all* the

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underlying components of power”, as well as the absence of ‘peer competitors’, would increasingly stoke tension between the ostensible ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the Cold War (Krauthammer, 1990; Wohlforth, 1999, pp.6–7).

Greatest umbrage was taken to Western intervention in the Balkans, first in Bosnia in 1992–1995, then Kosovo in 1999. These were issues of high salience in Russia, and particularly in the military, since the Serbs that NATO forces were bombing were a traditional Russian ally (Kaplan, 2004, p.121). What followed was an “unprecedented tide of popular anti-NATO and anti-Western sentiment”, binding the unpopular Yeltsin to a path that made a breakdown of East–West relations nigh unavoidable (Buckley and Cummings, 2001, p.25). Making matters worse, only weeks before, NATO had accepted Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as members, thereby reneging on the alleged (but widely held) promise that NATO would not expand eastwards (see: Sarotte, 2014). Moscow accordingly demanded no further NATO expansion, despite assurances that significant forces would not be stationed in the new territories, and the establishment of the NATO–Russia Council (Buckley, 2001, p.160; Wright, 2001, p.220; Kaplan, 2004, p.144).

If 1999 was a bad year for East–West relations, 2004 was catastrophic. NATO undertook its largest expansion yet, accepting seven new member states, whilst the European Union grew by ten members following its ‘big bang’ enlargement. Worse yet, the EU launched its Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Aimed at preventing the emergence of “new dividing lines” in Europe, its Eastern Partnership (EaP) borrowed heavily and conspicuously from the *acquis communautaire*, the body of law that must be implemented prior to membership (Edwards, 2008, p.46; p.48). Similarly NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) continued apace, encouraging its members (including Georgia and Ukraine) to “maintain and increase their links with NATO”, should they wish to be considered for membership at a later date (Wright, 2001, p.221). It appeared that their eastward march would not be halted by Russian pleas alone.

Evidence of these scheme’s Westernising effects was perceived with the eruption of the ‘colour revolutions’ in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Though differing in their content, a common theme was the attempt to introduce “democracy from below”, whilst ridding themselves of corrupt leaders and institutions (Lane, 2012, p.2). Each received substantial outside funding, principally from Western organisations aimed at supporting democratic institutions—a practice reminiscent of the Radio Free Europe project during the Cold War (see: Long, 2014). Whether such efforts were a form of ‘outsourced’ political warfare, or the organic acts of private citizens and groups in receipt of US governmental aid, Russian security services blamed Western powers for inciting the protests and “stepped up their efforts” to curtail such activities (Lucas, 2012, p.60). Having interpreted these revolutions as “both an external and an internal threat”, similar protests in 2005, 2008, and 2011 were rapidly and effectively suppressed in Russia (Wilson, 2012, p.257; Lane, 2012, p.1).

The final acts jeopardising East–West relations before war broke out in Georgia came in 2008, with the recognition of Kosovan independence on the 17th February, and the NATO summit in Bucharest. At this summit, following heated disagreements, it was agreed *not* to provide Ukraine and Georgia with Membership Action Plans (MAPs), but to nevertheless “welcome” their “Euro-Atlantic aspirations”, and agree that “these countries will become members” (Asmus, 2010, p.112; Sakwa, 2014, p.4). Though ostensibly satisfied that Ukraine and Georgia had not been granted MAPs, Putin used the Bucharest summit to outline his arsenal, should relations deteriorate. On Kosovo, he cited the “many such situations” in the FSU, including Crimea, in which Russia thus far had been “very responsible” and “very weighted”, whilst asserting its continued security interests there—interests that the force of arms, not words, would soon confirm (Putin, 2008).

War Returns to Georgia

There were many precursors to the 2008 conflict, and though each side increasingly prepared for war—Russia and NATO held simultaneous military exercises beginning on 15th July, titled ‘Caucasus Frontier 2008’ and ‘Immediate Response’, respectively—open warfare was hardly considered inevitable (Gahrton, 2010, p.177). Politically and militarily there had been many provocations that year, from Georgia’s withdrawal from the Joint Control Commission (the body monitoring peace in South Ossetia) in March, to Russia’s resumption of trade and establishment of ‘special relations’ with Abkhazia in June (Gahrton, 2010, p.177). Militarily, South Ossetian militiamen had engaged in skirmishes with Georgian police forces, often resulting in casualties (Gahrton, 2010, p.177). Nevertheless, the 2008

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war finally began on the 7th August with a large-scale Georgian offensive into South Ossetia—the crux of what Georgia hoped would be a “short victorious war [to] topple the separatist regime there”, whilst pre-empting a Russian intervention, of which there were many worrying signs (Lucas, 2012, p.117).

What followed, however, was an devastating Russian counter-attack, bent on the “full demilitarisation of Georgia” as well as overthrowing “the hated pro-Western regime led by President Mikheil Saakashvili” (Felgenhauer, 2009, p.163). Whilst Saakashvili would survive until the 2013 election, the former objective was met—Russian forces remained in Georgia for more than two weeks, seizing and destroying military equipment; it was this during this period that Georgia suffered the bulk of its losses (many of which were, to Russia’s chagrin, purchased from Ukraine) (Pukhov, 2010, p.107; pp.139–141). Intelligence again played a significant role, for neither Georgian services (trained by NATO) nor any other anticipated the size of the Russian counter-attack—a force the equivalent of a Motor Rifle division, requiring in excess of months to prepare for such an undertaking (Felgenhauer, 2009, p.164; Lucas, 2012, p.116; Chang, 2008, p.1). Russia, on the other hand, in knowing “what Georgia knew, and how Georgia would react”, was able to respond rapidly and with a decisive preponderance once their separatist ‘vanguard’ had drawn Georgian forces into conflict (Lucas, 2012, p.117; Felgenhauer, 2009, p.169; pp.162–163).

The War for Ukraine

Following three months of protests on Kiev’s Maidan square, it was the removal of Yanukovich from office on 22nd February, 2014 that prompted the first Russian intervention in Ukraine (Sakwa, 2014, p.100). Preparations and provocations were fewer than in Georgia, given the unpredictable nature of the Euromaidan protests, yet a bitter dispute over trading blocs—the EU and Russia’s nascent Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—had soured already-fraught East–West relations since 2012 (Sakwa, 2014, p.80). The EU’s aim in seeking an Association Agreement with Ukraine, Tony Wood writes, was to “wrest the country from Russia’s sphere of influence and continue the joint eastward expansion of NATO and the EU”; Russia’s objective was reactionary: “to keep Ukraine out of Western security and economic structures”, and to this end it had already committed to trade war by 2013 (cited in: Sakwa, 2014, p.80; KyivPost, 2013). Russia was firmly convinced that the EU would first undermine Russia’s dubious influence, and worse, was but the “stalking horse” for NATO expansion (Mearsheimer, 2014).

As in Georgia, military exercises were used to mobilise forces for Russia’s first operation: the annexation of Crimea (Alpert and Solomon, 2014). Termed the ‘Crimean gambit’ by Richard Sakwa, this operation again demonstrated the primacy of security concerns, for the fear was pervasive that pro-Western Ukraine would soon renege on the ‘status of forces’ agreement, and the peninsula, along with its airfields, radar bases, and naval facilities would fall into NATO’s hands (Sakwa, 2014, pp.100–102). The second stage of Russia’s intervention came in the guise of supporting Ukraine’s Russian minority in Donbas, concentrated in the Lugansk and Donetsk oblasts, and was a confirmation of US fears that Russia’s “South Ossetia strategy” would not be confined to the Caucasus (Wikileaks, 2009). This began with the provision of heavy armaments in June 2014 and the strictly deniable leadership of GRU forces (including the *Vostok* and *Zapad* battalions, which saw action in Georgia and Chechnya before [Pukhov, 2010, pp.166–167]), which are suspected of orchestrating the takeover of administrative buildings throughout Ukraine’s east (Logiurato, 2014; Galeotti, 2014).

Russia’s war in Ukraine only escalated into a significant counter-attack following the Ukrainian Army’s (UA) successful Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) that drove the indigenous rebels almost to the Russian border (KyivPost, 2014). Nevertheless, a *qualitative* departure from the war in 2008 has been the deployment of “non-linear” or “special” war (Galeotti, 2014; Schindler, 2014). An “amalgam of espionage, subversion and terrorism by spies and special operatives”, special war might entail widespread destruction, but without a formal declaration of war; this element of Russian involvement in Ukraine perhaps better recalls Georgia’s conflicts of the 1990s than that of 2008 (Schindler, 2014).

In 2008, Russian peacekeepers had been attacked (the claim that they were killed is more dubious), thus furnishing Russia with a viable *casus belli*—even the EU report, published September 2009, concluded that Georgia was first to violate international law (Asmus, 2010, p.43; Rettman, 2009). Ukraine, however, has assiduously avoided such acts, despite the death-toll of regular Russian forces approaching 300 (Открытая Россия [Open Russia], 2015). To

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this end, Ukraine has avoided declaring war on Russia, instead maintaining the fiction of the ATO, and has been careful when engaged in artillery ‘duels’ to avoid shelling Russia’s sovereign territory—a weakness Russian and pro-Russian forces alike exploit (Borger and Higgins, 2015; BBC News, 2014).

Even the means by which war is fought in Ukraine recalls the Georgia war. Ordnance played a significant role in Georgia—of 1,964 injured, the majority suffered shrapnel wounds inflicted by Russian artillery and Close Air Support (CAS) (Pukhov, 2010, pp.109–110). In Ukraine, another quantitative difference presents itself, for whilst artillery duels have been the mainstay of the fighting, a Russian air presence would be too bold a breach of its alleged non-involvement; the skies are kept clear instead *via* Russia’s provision of vehicle-mounted and man-portable anti-aircraft weapons (Pappalardo, 2014; Bender, 2014). Morale in the UA has similarly been a chronic issue. In Georgia, 1,700 soldiers faced criminal prosecution for desertion during the war; in Ukraine, following the loss at Ilovaisk, Donetsk airport, and recently Debaltseve, Ukraine’s ‘national morale’ is increasingly questioned as the UA struggles to repel repeated Russian offensives (Balmforth, 2015).

Whether Ukraine will share a similar settlement to Georgia (and with talk of ‘Novorossiya’ rife, this is certainly possible [see: Putin, 2014]) is yet to be seen—differences in domestic circumstances as well as world order have certainly impacted on the conflicts’ similarity. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that these wars bear significant resemblance—each share strategic concerns as their primary motivation, each were waged to prevent members of Russia’s ‘near abroad’ from joining Western organisations, and each bear the hallmarks of war as a means to retain influence—whilst even on operational terms there are similarities; from the primacy of ordnance to the participation of *the very same* battalions, history very much repeats itself in the war in Donbas.

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[1] This guaranteed Russia a 20-year lease on its military bases in Sevastopol.

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