

Georgia: The Commentariat Goes to War

David Clark

The Georgian War of 2008 has prompted a flurry of comparisons with other European crises that have occurred in years ending with the number eight. The Munich Crisis of 1938 is an obvious point of reference since it involved a major authoritarian power invoking ethnic solidarity and humanitarian aid as a pretext for dismembering a smaller neighbour, Czechoslovakia. The invasion of the same country by the Soviet Union in 1968 provides an even more tempting comparison because the Kremlin ordered it to bring a rebellious satellite into line and reassert control within its 'sphere of influence.'

The parallels are interesting and to some extent instructive, but the differences in both cases are more significant than the similarities. Nasty though it is, Putin's Russia is not a totalitarian construct, nor is it the bearer of an ideology of world domination. The implications of Russia's new assertiveness may be profound for the future of Europe, and perhaps even the shape of the next world order, but they will not provide the spark for a new global confrontation on a par with the Second World War or even the Cold War. Modern Russia has neither the will nor the capacity to pose a threat on that scale. Indeed, it might be better to dispense with twentieth century analogies altogether.

A more revealing historical comparison is perhaps 1848 – the so-called Springtime of Nations – a year of revolution for national and political freedom that engulfed Europe only to succumb, within a few months, to the forces of counter-revolution and reaction. The leaders demanding self-determination for the peoples of Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and the Czech lands, among others, were a mix of constitutional liberals, democrats and republicans; their opponents, the autocratic continental powers of Austria, Prussia, Russia and the Ottomans. At stake was the principle of sovereignty and the question of whether it resided with the people or their imperial rulers.

The revolutions of 1848 failed in their immediate objectives, but they dealt a blow to the edifice of conservative power in Europe from which it never fully recovered. The nations and peoples of Europe, aware of their potential for the first time, gradually asserted themselves. The principle of self-determination within Europe

was established at the Paris Peace conference in 1919 at the insistence of US President Woodrow Wilson. And although the new countries created as a result proved too weak to resist the totalitarian onslaught of the 1930s, they re-emerged when freedom advanced again. The defeat of fascism in 1945 restored democracy and self-determination in the western half of the continent; the collapse of the Soviet empire achieved the same in the east. At the time, many believed that the velvet revolutions of 1989-91 had completed the process, creating a 'Europe whole and free.' The significance of the Georgia War is that this assumption now faces a serious challenge.

It might seem odd in an age of political cynicism in which the fruits of past struggles are taken so casually for granted, but Guiseppe Mazzini, Lajos Kossuth, Stanislaw Worcell and other leaders of 1848, who came together as exiles in London to form the Central Committee for a Democratic Europe, would have recognised in today's Europe the fulfilment of some of their highest ideals. They struggled for national liberation, but their instincts were deeply internationalist and they assumed as a matter of course that a Europe of free nations and peoples would come together in fraternal and voluntary union. Mazzini was among the first to call for a United States of Europe.

The forty-eighters would also have recognised in Putin's Russia the face of their enemy. In acknowledging that Russia's war aims include the establishment of a zone of 'privileged interest,' Putin's ally, President Medvedev, was reviving a geopolitical doctrine straight from the nineteenth century school of European power politics. This is not a scheme in which notions of popular sovereignty and self-determination have any place. It is one in which autocracy and imperialism go hand in hand. Put simply, Russia's governing elite rejects the idea that countries on its periphery have the right to choose domestic and foreign policies that conflict with Moscow's wishes or that relations between them should be mediated by international law, sovereign equality or consent. Russia is a big power with privileged status and the right to assert its will over smaller neighbours by force. Forget Donald Rumsfeld: this is the real clash between old and new Europe.

As elsewhere, Russia's intervention in Georgia came as a shock to the political and media classes of the United Kingdom, and it was followed by acres of commentary trying to make sense of it from every conceivable viewpoint. But among the few places where the essentially nineteenth century character of this conflict was properly understood was within reactionary and realist circles of the conservative

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right. Here it was openly applauded as an antidote to the fuzzy-minded Kantian notions of perpetual peace that became fashionable at the end of the Cold War and an opportunity to re-assert some old truths about the essentially Darwinian nature of international relations.

There have always been those on the right astute enough to see through Putin's sly appropriation of Stalinist symbolism and recognise him as an archetypal nationalist strongman. A generation earlier, the same sort of people lauded Pinochet, Zia and Marcos. Further back, before the world knew better, it was Franco, Mussolini and Hitler. In every case the argument has been the same: the strongman is only doing what comes naturally in standing up forcefully for the interests of his nation; if only we would put aside our foolish belief in human rights, democracy and other universal pieties in order to follow suit, the world would be a better place.

As usual, Peter Hitchens was the standard setter for reactionary opinion:

[I] often wish we were more like Russia, aggressively defending our interests, making sure we owned our own crucial industries, killing terrorists instead of giving in to them, running our own foreign policy instead of trotting two feet behind George W Bush. Russia, oddly enough, has come to stand for national sovereignty and independence, while we have given up our own. (*Mail on Sunday* 23/8/08)

In a similar vein, Correlli Barnett had this to say:

[W]e in the West should jettison moral indignation and global do-goodery as the basis of policy, and instead emulate Russia admirable reversion to 19th century realpolitik. (*Daily Mail* 21/8/08)

Realists have rushed to make similar points, albeit from a standpoint of supposed pragmatism rather than infatuation. Lord Skidelsky condescended to share his imperious view of the new reality of European diplomacy in the following terms:

About a year ago I was at a lunch with the Georgian Ambassador, a delightful man but full of small-country big talk. I pointed out politely that small countries on the edge of big countries had to be careful not to provoke their larger neighbour; but that it is also perfectly possible for them to coexist peacefully if the smaller nation understands its place in the scheme

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of things.... [W]hatever the UN charter says about equal sovereignty, some states are more sovereign than others. (*Times* 28/8/08)

Sir Christopher Meyer, former British Ambassador to Washington under Tony Blair, showed that parts of the British foreign policy establishment still feel more at home in the nineteenth century:

Mr Miliband and others have condemned the notion of returning to the geopolitics of the Congress of Vienna which, in 1815 after the Napoleonic Wars, divided Europe into spheres of influence between empires and nations. They perhaps forget that what was agreed at Vienna held at bay for almost a century a general European war. Something similar is needed today, based again on spheres of influence. NATO must renounce the provocative folly of being open to Georgian or, worse, Ukrainian membership. (*Times* 2/9/08)

You have to admire the honesty of the realists and reactionaries. Opinions that most civilised people would be ashamed to voice in public trip so easily from the tongue. The Congress of Vienna, in case we forget, was a gentleman's agreement to stop the aristocracies of Europe from killing each other. It did nothing to stop them from terrorising and killing those unfortunate enough to live under their despotic rule, a point lost on Sir Christopher and his like.

There is nothing particularly new in this, of course, but what is remarkable about recent trends in the British foreign policy debate is how often these traditionally conservative ideas now find an echo in liberal and left wing circles. I'm not talking here about the residue of the Stalinist left represented most obviously by Andrew Murray, chair of Stop the War, who argued that Georgia and other countries in the region have no right to choose policies that depart from the Moscow line, even though the Moscow line today is a toxic brew of nationalist chauvinism and gangster capitalism rather than 'proletarian internationalism.' The pretensions of this group to represent the anti-war and anti-imperialist cause is as fraudulent now as it was in the days when it played cheerleader to Soviet militarism and imperialism.

The real problem lies with those who really ought to know better. Take Mary Dejevsky, liberal columnist on *The Independent*, making the case against western involvement in the Caucasus:

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It may seem unpalatable, but there may be times when idealism must cede to realism and big and small should be left to sort things out between themselves. A conflict where the balance is artificially altered by third-party military intervention may delay the only lasting solution. (*Independent* 12/8/08)

The 'only lasting solution,' for those who don't get it, is a world order built on the bones of the weak. It's hard to imagine a bolder statement of the amoral Darwinian-realist view of international relations.

Following this logic, a recurring theme on both right and left has been the suggestion that the West provoked Russia into an aggressive response by developing friendly ties with countries on its borders, thereby upsetting the natural pecking order of Eurasian politics and encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence. Viewed from this essentially imperialist position, Russia's military intervention was no more than a legitimate act of self-defence. This is how the Guardian's Seumas Milne chose to put it:

By any sensible reckoning, this is not a story of Russian aggression, but of US imperial expansion and ever tighter encirclement of Russia by a potentially hostile power. That a stronger Russia has now used the South Ossetian imbroglio to put a check on that expansion should hardly come as a surprise. (*Guardian* 14/8/08)

Of course, it isn't hard to understand why Russia's rulers are offended by the desire of countries that once formed part of the Soviet Union to join western institutions. Countries like Ukraine and Georgia are making a civilisational choice and it is one that reflects badly on Putin's model of autocratic state capitalism. They want to become part of the democratic West. But the idea that this constitutes some sort of provocation only makes sense if you consider them in some way to be the territorial property of Russia rather than independent sovereign states in their own right.

Even the Guardian's editorial writers fell into this trap when they described NATO expansion as a 'sphere of influence' project comparable to Putin's, as if there could be any equivalence between a voluntary association of democracies and an authoritarian hegemonic block constructed by means of military intimidation and energy blackmail. The way to avoid conflict, apparently, is for NATO to 'stop rearranging the furniture on Russia's sensitive southern border' (*Guardian* Editorial 29/8/08). Discounted in this assessment is any recognition that people living next

to Russia have the right to determine their own international alignments, especially if they conflict with the preferences of leftwing journalists and pundits living safely in the UK.

This presents obvious problems in relation to the professed democratic values of the people making this argument. The way round this is to question whether the western orientation of former communist countries is really democratically based at all. According to Milne:

American military bases have spread across Eastern Europe and central Asia, as the US has helped install one anti-Russian client government after another through a series of colour-coded revolutions.

This is an astonishing distortion of what has been happening in Eastern Europe since the end of the Soviet era. These governments haven't been 'installed'; they have been elected in almost every country where the people have had a free and fair opportunity to decide from themselves. It is from the demands made by these voters that the clamour to join NATO and the EU has come, often in the face of disinterest or scepticism from western elites. There has been no American plot or even a consistent and coherent American policy, as the confused and disjointed response to the Georgia War amply shows.

On one major point this group is in unanimous agreement. As Guardian columnist, Jonathan Steele, put it, NATO 'has no business looking for new members in the Caucasus or central Asia' (*Guardian* 25/8/08). Steele denies that this amounts to a Russian veto, claiming that NATO alone has the right to decide who does or does not join and should reject applications from countries like Georgia and Ukraine according to its own interests. Yet if these countries meet the conditions of membership, the only basis for rejecting them is surely fear of Russia. Hide behind any diplomatic fiction you like, but that is a Russian veto and with it acceptance of Medvedev's contention that Russia has 'privileged interests' over the countries around it.

The extent of this erosion of standards within liberal and leftwing circles should not be overstated. Most commentators from these sections of the political spectrum have been consistent in applying their values and apportioning blame where it mainly belongs. Putin's Russia is seen as an aggressively revisionist power with autocratic and imperial instincts that need to be challenged and blocked. But there

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is also no doubt that this consensus is narrower than it should be. More significantly, it is narrower than it would have been a decade ago.

At that time progressive opinion was enthusiastic about the terms of the post-Cold War settlement set out in the Charter of Paris, signed by the major powers, including the United States and the Soviet Union, in 1990. This rejected the old spheres of influence approach, called for friendly and peaceful relations between states based on equality and democratic values and confirmed the right of every European country to determine their own futures, including, specifically, their own security arrangements. The diminished ranks of the old far left continued to take a knee-jerk anti-imperialist line in opposition to the West, but mainstream progressives saw in the end of the Cold War an opportunity for western governments to move away from realpolitik and pursue a consistent, values-based foreign policy. The right of countries to associate freely was certainly one of those values.

The fracturing of that consensus is something that only really started with the War on Terror. This is not the place to rehearse once again the rights and wrongs of American foreign policy during the Bush Presidency. Whatever stance you take, it is obvious that the invasion of Iraq, in particular, has had an extraordinary polarising effect on liberal and leftwing opinion. Even where opposition has been rationally based, it has often expressed itself in extremely irrational ways. This is evident in the positions taken above, but even more so in the readers' comments posted on The Guardian's Comment is Free website, where considerations of taste and rigour that apply to published writers are often lacking. Here, conspiracy theories abound and everyone is judged according to where they stand in relation to American policy, with those deemed too close labelled 'neocon.'

Russia is the latest international issue to become a proxy in this shouting match. Since Georgia, like most post-communist countries, wishes to belong to the democratic West, it is axiomatically true that it is now part of the Project for the New American Century and therefore an enemy in the great cosmic struggle against Washington. Since Putin's Russia is willing to act against Georgia's ambitions and oppose American and western policies more generally, it must also be true that it provides a countervailing power to be welcomed. In this way, reason has become lost in a red mist of anti-western self-loathing. Little effort is made to assess Putin's credentials against the criteria applied to Bush and other western leaders. In the fight to oppose American hegemony, any counter-hegemon will do. Never mind that the counter-hegemon in this case murders and imprisons its political

opponents, crushes dissent, has been responsible for 5000 'disappearances' in Chechnya, pursues policies of imperialist domination against its neighbours and represents capitalism's ugliest possible face.

These differences can only be overcome, and reason restored, if everyone involved in this debate is willing to accept a greater degree of responsibility. From liberals and leftists alienated by Bush it requires greater intellectual rigour and moral seriousness in assessing Russia and other foreign policy issues against a consistent set of values. The logic of supporting 'my enemy's enemy' has led too many into positions of political disrepute. Without consciously realising it, they have ended up choosing the Europe of autocracy, power politics and empire over the Europe of popular sovereignty, self-determination and law.

Responsibility also falls to European leaders to make a more effective contribution to the construction of a balanced and legitimate world order that enjoys broader support. The unipolarism that has created such hostility is not really the consequence of a desire on the part of America to dominate. It is a momentary phase compounded by Europe's weakness and its failure to develop a global profile commensurate with its economic strength. If the maldistribution of world power is not addressed by the democratic world, it will be addressed by the rise of autocratic powers like Russia and China with consequences that even those currently rejoicing in Russia's resurgence may come to regret. The EU's failure to use economic levers to modify Russian behaviour means that countries in Eastern Europe will be more inclined than ever to emphasise the hard security guarantees provided by a close alliance with the US, contributing to the very imbalances that cause resentment.

Finally, there is responsibility on the part of the next US President to restore western unity with a foreign policy that is more humble and inclusive. Let's have no more arrogant talk of missions defining coalitions rather than the other way round. The coalition itself is a precious thing, never more so than now when an autocratic Russia is once again pushing to divide Europe from America. A prominent Russian liberal intellectual recently told a meeting in London that Putin is hoping for a McCain victory because he thinks it will help him to achieve precisely that. Whoever ends up in the White House would do well to take that on board and seek to cultivate friends where Bush has lost them. This would not be a sign of weakness but of statesmanship.

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We may not be in a Cold War scenario, but a real struggle for Europe's soul is taking place nevertheless. The values that define the new Europe of independent, democratic nations are under attack from an older European tradition of based on a reverence for despotic power. The battles of 1848 are being played out in a modern form. Sadly, some progressives appear to be on the wrong side of the barricades.

David Clark is Chairman of the Russia Foundation. He served as an advisor to Robin Cook, the late British Foreign Secretary.