

Dear Friends:

Here are two well-written opinion pieces that bring us up to date on the critical situation that first came to world attention a year ago, when the Republic of Georgia got itself entangled in a mini-war against its gigantic neighbor and former imperial master, Russia.

That incident created a situation that still remains potentially explosive, notwithstanding the fact that it has disappeared from the front pages of our newspapers. Those among you who may be suffering from boredom in these August doldrums, when there never seems to be enough discouraging news about wars, threats of new wars, financial disasters and political scandals to satisfy our thirst for gloom and doom, I thought you might like to take on another project: remembering Ossetia and Abkhazia, and worrying about that still-unresolved crisis --- a situation that unfortunately could still become the source of very serious headaches for Europe, the US, Central Asia and even the ever-suffering Middle East (which one would think had enough of its own home-grown difficulties!)

There are two articles here, if you are interested. (If not, hit **DELETE** now and spare yourself some unnecessary mental stress!)

The first piece is by a woman named **Gwynne Dyer**. She is a highly respected, London-based Canadian journalist who has been an independent columnist, broadcaster, lecturer on international affairs and military analyst for more than twenty years. The article below was picked up by SALON.

Below Ms. Dyer's article is a follow-up commentary and analysis by **William Polk**, whose long and distinguished career has included service on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff under JFK, and professorships at the University of Chicago and Harvard. Note in particular Bill's references to the questionable role played by Israel in this imbroglio.

Ray

A Year After: The South Ossetian War

by Gwynne Dyer

A year ago this week, Georgia attacked Russia. It was like Jamaica attacking

the United States. It was such a foolish and foredoomed act that at first most people believed the Georgian propaganda blaming it all on the Russians. Surely Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili wouldn't do something so utterly stupid. But he did — and he lost, of course.

There are two hangovers from the week-long war that still have not cleared up, however. One is the lingering impression in the West, left over from the way that Western media reported the conflict at the time, that the “Russian bear” has turned nasty and expansionist. The other is a promise to Georgia that should never have been made.

In the year since the war, it has become clear that the Georgian attack, which sought to regain control of the breakaway territory of South Ossetia, was planned well in advance. The Russians only responded after their peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia came under Georgian attack, but the Georgians won the propaganda battle.

Saakashvili painted the Russians as evil aggressors, relying on Cold War stereotypes: “Russia’s war on Georgia echoes events in Finland in 1939, Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968,” he told the Washington Post in August, 2008. It fitted Western preconceptions, so the media went along with it.

So did US presidential candidate John McCain, condemning Russia’s “violent aggression” and claiming that “Russian actions, in clear violation of international law, have no place in 21st century Europe.” Barack Obama was more circumspect, but in the midst of an election campaign he chose not to expose his flank to the Cold Warriors of the Republican Party by openly challenging their version of events.

The other problem, from a European perspective, was US President George W. Bush’s push to get Georgia and another former Soviet republic, Ukraine, admitted to the NATO alliance. These countries are to the south of Russia, not between it and Western Europe, and bringing them into the Western alliance would alarm and alienate the Russians. Yet there is no practical way that NATO could defend them if they got into a fight with the Russians.

Indeed, this concern may have been the main motive behind the creation of a European Union commission to investigate the origins of the war. The commission is led by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, who has served in

the area as an observer, and it has been gathering evidence for almost a year now. If its conclusions blame the war on Georgia, as seems likely, they will not be unwelcome in Brussels.

Some of those conclusions were leaked last spring to the German newsmagazine “Der Spiegel,” and they support the contention that Georgia deliberately concentrated its troops and launched a surprise attack on South Ossetia, with the aim of seizing control of the province before Russia could respond.

Between 16,000 and 20,000 Georgian troops, all equipped with modern US weapons, attacked the South Ossetian militia and about 1,000 Russian peacekeeping troops who were stationed there on the night of Aug. 7. Even the Georgian “peacekeeping” battalion that was also stationed in the province took part in the attack. The local capital, Tskhinvali, fell into Georgian hands within hours, and dozens of Russian troops were killed or injured.

Moscow responded quickly, and a large Russian force, including heavy armor, was sent south from the Russian province of North Ossetia through the tunnel under the main Caucasus range (which the Georgians had failed to secure) on Aug. 8. In one more day Georgian troops had been driven out of South Ossetia, and the Russians even followed them some distance into Georgia proper before withdrawing again at the end of the month.

Erosi Kitsmarishvili, Georgia’s former ambassador to Moscow and a former confidant of Saakashvili’s, testified to the Georgian Parliament last November that Georgian officials told him in April 2008 that they planned to start a war to recover Abkhazia, one of Georgia’s two breakaway regions, 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.

Both the evidence of observers on the ground and the testimony of disillusioned Georgian officials like Kitsmarishvili are driving the EU commission toward the conclusion that Russia merely responded to the Georgian aggression. It will be helpful to have an authoritative Western body acknowledge that Russia has not undergone some fundamental change of strategy.

The EU commission, whose report has been postponed until next month, will not formally recommend against Georgia joining NATO, but the implication there will also be clear. Nobody really believed that NATO would ever fight World War III to save Georgia, even it were the innocent victim of Russian aggression, but by attacking Russia Saakashvili got everybody off the hook.

Retired British Army Col. Christopher Langton, Senior Fellow for Conflict and Defense Diplomacy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, summed it up only weeks after the war. "Georgia's dream is shattered, but the country can only blame itself for that."

Commentary by William Polk.

Dear Friends,

The important but unwritten messages one must read into this report are several: first, how easily Americans are manipulated when most of us hardly know where the crisis of the week is even located: how many Americans could describe South Ossetia, or even place it on a map?

Second, how we are often led/misled into untenable, dangerous and actual or potentially costly ventures, such as suggesting Georgia join NATO, by emotion (here hatred of the Russians) rather than common sense (there being no rationale, no conceivable benefit and no possibility that we or the European Union would or even could protect Georgia from Russia if it joined NATO, whatever in today's different world joining NATO might mean).

Third, how we depend on instant "experts," usually journalists, for evaluations that they do not themselves understand but which, having set the public perception of an issue, could lead us into ruinous decisions.

Fourth, how we build traps for ourselves around the world: why were the Georgians armed with American weapons to use as they saw fit, whether or not they got us into deep trouble.

Fifth, what had we said or done to make President Mikheil Saakashvili so sure of our support that he risked his government and perhaps even his

country in this foolish venture?

And, finally, did anyone think what the next step would probably have been? In my experience, sequences of events rarely have a convenient terminal point, but more likely lead on both to new events and to a changed environment. Suppose the Russians had not stopped and withdrawn, as fortunately (no thanks to the Georgians) they did. What then? Had anyone thought about the day after...?

Enough? No, in fact, there is more. It has not yet come out, but there was a partly executed plan to use Georgia as a springboard for an Israeli attack on Iran. It is tempting to think that this may at least partially explain why Georgia had so many American weapons. There is a certain (albeit faulty) logic in using Georgia as a base for Israeli action, although the Georgians apparently did not understand it or else decided to play their own game.

An attack on Iran from neighboring Georgia (which at various periods in its history was a province of Iran) would have avoided the obstacle the Israelis faced if they attacked overhead Syria (where they have carried out one probe to prepare the way, have advertised their capability with an massive airborne "exercise" over the Mediterranean, have publicized the units to be involved and have made proclamation after demarche for years, and right up to yesterday, saying that they would attack Iran if America did not. To attack overhead Syria would have subjected them to Syrian anti-aircraft defenses (and would have forced the hand of the US since between Syria and Iran is Iraq, whose airspace is controlled by the USAF) or overhead Saudi Arabia (which would have been deeply embarrassing to the Saudis). So in addition to these options, they have been moving guided missile ships (through Suez and down the Red Sea) and submarines (up from the Indian Ocean or the Arabian Sea) toward or into the Persian Gulf. Armed with American "harpoon" missiles, which may be nuclear tipped, these ships and submarines could devastate Iran. Any one of these ventures certainly would cause a backlash.

In previous messages, I have spelled out what that backlash would amount to for the rest of us:

at least temporary interdiction to the flow of 40% of the world's energy; military and paramilitary action wherever the Iranians and their allies and friends could reach their attackers and their presumed allies -- including

Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel;
use of covert action against Israeli, American and probably EU targets;
spreading still further the widely felt twin angers -- memories of Western imperialism and colonialism, and their aftermath, and Western "crusade-ism" against Islam -- more intensively across Africa, Asia, Europe and North America;
possibly derailing and certainly slowing down the still fragile moves toward economic recovery in Europe and America; and further accelerating the shift in the world balance of wealth and power eastward.

Vice President Joe Biden astonishingly sought to dodge all of these issues by suggesting that it was no business of the USA what the Israelis decided to do. If a college freshman in an international relations course had written something like that in an exam, he would have flunked the course! The consequences of an attack along any of these four routes would have severely damaged America and our European friends; worse, it would probably have lured us into hostilities with Iran -- all we need since we now are engaged in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan at near ruinous cost -- because, while the Israelis could start the war, they could not finish it. At the very minimum almost certainly they would have demanded that we bail them out financially. (When I was in government, the word "million" was still in use. Now "billion" has morphed into "trillion." My guess is that the Afghan war is going to cost us upwards of half of our GDP or perhaps as much as \$6 trillion. Another war...well, the sky's the limit.)

In short, Georgia is or could have been a piece in a complex and highly dangerous game of nations for which we would have paid a huge, perhaps nearly fatal, price. Yet, if we are honest, I doubt that many of us -- and apparently not many more in our government -- had a clue about it. The disparity between our overwhelming power and our underwhelming ignorance could hardly be clearer.

Since, at least so far, this was just a "near miss," it would be wonderful if we could regard it as a clear call for us to begin, at long last, to learn something about this complex world in which we must live -- or die. Every concerned citizen should at least run for membership on the local school board, since the odds of bringing knowledge to the Congress seem so long.

William R. Polk