

### Review 3

**Title:** Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus. By Isaenko, Anatoly. 2011. Second Edition. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

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At the outset, I surmise that this book is an outstanding work on the endlessly intricate political, economic, geographic boundaries, religions, warfare, attempts at peace, cultural and social relationships of Caucasian nations and, in at least one case, Nagorno-Karabakh, self-imposed independence. The book's metaphoric title itself, Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus, reveals that this region is in a state of seemingly endless conflict immune to any semblance of a permanent resolution. However, the author proposes throughout the book a trajectory toward regional stability. This reviewer will attempt to 1) summarize the nature of life in the Caucasus as presented by Isaenko, 2) evaluate the future of any kind of peace in the region based on an analysis of the recent demise of the former Yugoslavia and 3) discuss whether or not the author's recommendations for the future could possibly work.

The author's academic training is in history. However, and it is an enrichment of this research effort, he combines history, ethnography, anthropology, psychology, recorded interviews, media coverage, military analysis, and political science in a broad-based view of developments in the Caucasus.

The geographic area this book refers to at its most central location Abkhazia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Georgia, North and South Ossetia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan and Chechnya with particularly Russia, Turkey and Iran (Persia) as traditional major players in the region. But it includes an affected area stretching from the Balkans to China and to a lesser degree Central and Western Europe including Hungary, Poland, Germany and Britain. Depending who you ask, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, Dagestan and North Ossetia are Republics (denotes a separate language and constitution) within the Russian Federation, while Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are independent. Nagorno-Karabakh is a self-declared nation. One significant characteristic of the entire area is that it is mountainous. The mountains automatically divide various ethnic groups from each other contributing to religious (pagan, Muslim, Christian, atheism) and a host of other divisions. However, national boundaries which were drawn on various occasions often divide ethnic groups across borders combining them with other, sometimes hostile, ethnic groups.

The history of the Caucasus includes invasion of among others Huns, Mongols, Turks, Iranians, conflict/cooperation with Russia and an “at each others’ throats”/ peace with each other. Many invasions and inter-ethnic discords were so absolutely brutal that the region abounds in traumas. Death and slavery often visited the Caucasus. To give an example of complicated history, Azerbaijan in the South was conquered by Persian, Arab, Roman, Mongol, Turkish and Russian empires. Armenia has a special grudge with Turkey which they state over time massacred a million and a half persons. Underlying relationships was an attitude that “gentleness or even decency” would be interpreted by the indigenous Caucasians as being weak. (p. 61) Conquerors were especially cruel. Every time invaders left the underlying indigenous patriotism and nationalism would resurface. Language, religion, history, alphabets all were “up for grabs” with Russians and others trying to stamp out existing ways. Within the indigenous cultures some people would co-operate with the conquerors to be hated by fellow countryman which served to contribute to traumas and animosities within and from without the areas involved.

The levels of unending ethnic hostilities are so complicated that there are “so-called root Russians” who are considered “one of us” whereas Russians from” Russia proper “(e.g., Northern Russia) are “outsiders.” (p. 118) The recent demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 has resulted in an incredible opening of old wounds. “The Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras witnessed an incredible jump in crime, poverty...violence, juvenile delinquency, divorce, etc.” It is claimed that only 17 percent of Georgia’s economy has been legal. Ethnic mafias appeared. (pp. 120-121)

Iseanko uses an ethnocentric nationalism typology to portray behavior in the Caucasus. It has as its most undesirable final phase a paranoid-schizoid behavioral pattern in which the self is halved into a bad-good split personality with one trying to destroy the other resulting in extreme forms of ethnic cleansing and genocide. (p. 129) I am here reminded of the work of Ivan Kos relating to ethnic problems in the former Yugoslavia. He uses fear stage theory in which people move from normal fear, e.g., not trying to run through heavy traffic, to chronic/imaginary fear, e.g., “exaggerated fearful concerns” which could, in the case of interethnic behavior, develop “cultural insensitivity and intolerance.” (Kos, 2000, pp. 43-44) In both cases, paranoid-schizoid and chronic/imaginary fear, the behavioral pattern can be extreme and as Isaenko indicates might result in genocide attempts of one group against another.

In Part Two of the book, the author digs deeply into the conflicts in the Caucasus. He develops a model to explain ethnic conflicts. In examining the “canyon of hatred” between Georgians and South Ossetians, he employs the paranoid-schizoid typology to show that Georgians and Ossetians instead of getting along enter a phase of splitting off the other side into a bad/enemy part and perceiving themselves as the “good part.” This leads to ethnic cleansing. (pp. 143-145). Isaenko then goes into the ethnic conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. The scenario of conflict follows a usual course. There is a nationality building block for both sides combined with a linguistic building block, cultural boundary markers, distinguishing biological characteristics and ethnocentric mythology within the context of traumas. The result was a “hot stage” of war and ethnic cleansing. (p. 206) Also involved in Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation is that Georgia is pursuing joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with “modernization” of economic and political institutions along European structural arrangements as opposed to

traditional medieval ethnic based methods. The modernization aspect is critical here, since it involves the move in Georgia to a “new political culture of democracy” which is rejected by the other side. (p. 217).

Next Isaenko explores perhaps the most volatile conflict – the Chechen-Russian confrontation. Out of the traditional Russian-Chechen conflict there is an extremely complex array of currents. Political elements within the Republic of Chechnya attempted to become independent of the Russian Federation which resulted in warfare. The Chechens tried a democratic system which failed, oil complicated relations, and a radical Islamic jihad movement developed into terrorism. The whole discord spilled over into a wider surrounding area/ global jihad resulting in incidents such as a metro blast in Moscow and a school take-over in Beslan, North Ossetia in which many deaths occurred including nearly two hundred children and infants. These incidents received world-wide news coverage. (pp. 269-270 and 289-290)

Next, the Armenian-Azerbaijani crisis and the territory of Nagorny Karabakh’s independence drive are explored. Woven into this conflict is the Turkish-Armenian-Russian background of discord. Turks and Azerbaijanians are Muslim whereas Armenians and Russians are Christian. War resulted and the two sides still are faced-off militarily.

Woven into this presentation of ethnic conflict is a plea on the part of Isaenko for a move to Western democratic processes. He states that there is “no sense of the art of compromise, accommodation, the process of peaceful resolution of differences, the rule of law as an inclusive and systematic set of legal procedures, or of human rights consisting of a respect for everybody regardless of ethnic belonging.” (pp. 121-122) He hopes to “find the ways of interrupting vicious cycles of confrontation between these people....” (p. 178) He “hopes, for example,” that the Chechens might build a “civil society.” Reference is made to the Cantonal Confederation of Switzerland which is a respected “modern democracy.” Russian and radical Islamist ruling strategies in Chechnya are “authoritarian.” (p. 290).

In the final chapter, the author gives “A Proposal of Holding Mechanisms and Healing Efforts in the Ethnically Charged Caucasus.” (p. 387) He proposes the development “of a new political culture of democracy.” Instead of a subject citizen he calls for a participant political culture. He cites among other political scientists Arend Lijphart’s model for “consociational democracy.” (p. 399) Switzerland is an example with primarily Italians, French and Germans living in a cantonal arrangement with a weak national government and strong local arrangements designed to give latitude to cultural differences. He proposes a list of changes including a “culture of commonly shared labor and cooperation....” “A new educational system...” including a demythologization of ethnically oriented history. Get rid of vendettas and threatening pogroms through “folk diplomacy.” Create sport and cultural exchanges. Look to “regional conflict-prevention centers, regional human rights groups, and international criminal courts and independent media. Reduce corruption. In fact he concludes with a chart “Conditions That Create the Ideal.” (pp. 400-404).

The question is whether Isaenko is a dreamer or is he proposing a trajectory that conceivably could end the history of an intersect of factors which result in unceasing conflict (the Polygon of Satan). An examination of that demise of Yugoslavia would seem to send the message that the Caucasus will not be able to resolve ethnic differences. Confedera-

tion and consociational democracy were touted as a possible solution to keep Yugoslavia united. During the years surrounding (during and after) the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 Yugoslavia divided into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia-Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo. War was waged between Serbia and Croatia. Sarajevo (now the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina), the location of a world-wide Olympics which gave great pride to Yugoslavs, was reduced to rubble. NATO forces bombed Serbia. Woven into the former Yugoslavia were religious differences including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Muslim orientations. Ethnic backgrounds included Muslim and Christian cultures. Historical outrages include Muslim domination during the Ottoman Empire. A colleague of mine from Zagreb said: "We all used to study and play sports together. Now we engage in the game Balkan Inn. Five men enter a room, the lights are turned off, knives are pulled and one survivor leaves the room." I was a visiting professor at Evotos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary in 1994. One of my Serbian students conducted a content analysis of Belgrade newspapers finding mostly negative references to Muslims. A young Muslim woman on a later occasion said that "we will get our revenge." All the old wounds were opened. It might be that in areas with such diverse cultures that exist in the Balkans and Caucasus will have great difficulty in resolving their differences.

Yet, Iseanko's proposed trajectory would seem to deserve a try in order to ameliorate the often deadly differences that exist in the Caucasus. The same could be a solution for the Balkans as well. New rules might lead to a more sane future over time. Set a course and stick to it.

Another model which could be considered in whole or part is the modern German nation. Political institutions are dispersed in order to decentralize power. Parliament is located in Berlin whereas administration largely is situated in Bonn. The Federal Republic has two national court systems with one located in Stuttgart and a Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe. It is the latter which could be of interest to a multi-ethnic state. The Constitutional Court was established among other responsibilities to specifically address and protect the legal rights of individuals particularly versus the state. Such a court could be used to set legal precedence protecting the rights of ethnic minorities in the various Caucasian nations.

## Reference

- Kos, I. (2000). "Multiculturalism and Fear in Post-Communist Yugoslavia: The Transition From a Single Nation to Multiple States." Chapter in Russell F. Farnen, Henk Dekker, Daniel B. German and Rudiger Meyenberg, (Eds.), *Democracies in Transition: Political Cultures and Socialization in West and East*. Oldenburg, Germany: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universitat Oldenburg (BIS) Verlag.

