

Book Review

Title: Brothers at Each Other's Throats: Regularity of the Violent Ethnic Conflicts in the Post-Soviet Space. By Isaenko, Anatoly (2021) San Diego. Cognella

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Brothers at Each Other's Throats is about the century's old ethnic conflicts in the Southern rim of the former Soviet Union. The nations involved include the Ukraine to the Southeast running through the Black Sea, Moldova, Georgia, North and South Ossetia, Ingushetia, Abkhazia, Armenia to Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea. Major external players are Russia and Turkey with some intervention from Western nations. Especially in the Ukraine. The prediction is that the ethnic differences including Christian vs. Muslim religions, language variations, a history of warfare, external power dominance, and nationalism will produce endless clashes and war in this region.

There have been seven recent wars in this geographic area as reported in detail by Isaenko. Russo-Ukraine, Russo-Moldovan, Georgian-South Ossetian, North Ossetian-Ingushian, Georgia-Abkhazian, Russian-Chechen and Armenian-Azerbaijani wars have occurred. Among the triggers leading to war in all but the Ukraine and Moldova is a Christian vs. Islam religious difference. Georgia, North and South Ossetia, Russia and Armenia are Christian whereas Abkhazia, Chechia, Ingushia and Azerbaijan are Islamic.

The author was born and raised in the Caucasus and received a PhD in History from Moscow State University. This book could be of "must read" interest to professors and students as well as foreign affairs and military personnel concerned with this area of the world.

This author is familiar with ethnic conflict in East Europe. In an issue of A Political Portrait Of Ukraine: Interethnic Relations & National Tolerance In The Countries Of Central & Eastern Europe in the lead article I co-authored (with Russell Farnen) an analysis of ethnic relations in Central and East Europe (CEE). The article reached the following conclusions which are applicable to the nations included in the Isaenko book:

1. The people of CEE remember their history including incidences of warfare and the often-insulting consequences.
2. There is no real tradition of civil rights in CEE and democracy always failed.
3. National borders often separated ethnic groups.
4. Minorities often do not fare well during economic downturns.
5. Governments often whip up emotions/sentiments and initiate aggressive actions without popular support.

6. Definite intractable, unsolvable minority problems exist in CEE.
7. Political education CEE states is one-sided.
8. Throughout CEE there is inadequate law enforcement training in minority law enforcement.
9. The decline of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON under the Soviet Union) resulted in a drop in economic cooperation which served to promote mutual interdependence. (Farnen and German, 1995, p.11-15)

That A Political Portrait Of The Ukraine was published by Democratic Initiatives funded by Freedom House (United States -US), National Endowment for Democracy (US), United States Agency for International Development, International Renaissance Foundation/Soros Foundation and Eurasia Foundation (US) is significant. The Western Ukraine is heavily oriented toward the Western nations of Europe and the United States. The Eastern Ukraine is Russian. Freedom House rates Azerbaijan, Crimea, and Russia as Not Free. They are autocratic nations. Russia supported the taking of Crimea and the Donbas region from the Ukraine and would be very paranoid if the West makes Ukraine part of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) and/or the European Union (EU).

Most of the nations covered by the Farnen-German article have become part of NATO and the EU. North Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Albania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and the former East Germany are members of NATO. All except North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania are members of the EU. These nations constitute the Western rim of the former Soviet Union. Russia will not accept particularly the Ukraine and Georgia, additionally maybe North Ossetia and Armenia or any other nation in the Southern rim as being part of NATO.

Left alone without significant change, as Isaenko points out, these Southern rim nations will engage in endless conflict with each other. Isaenko finds the conflicts in this region bewildering:

“The folks of my generation who grew up in the Soviet Union, probably remember the speeches of our schoolteachers and what they taught us. One of the least of these lessons was how, irrespective of our own ethnic origins, all of us are brothers and sisters who should be as united and eternal as the Soviet Union itself. As sad as it is to say, the story of Cain and Able, once again, has reared its head.” (p.305)

This observation reminds me of my colleague Ivan Siber from Zagreb, Croatia telling me that he did not at all understand the breakup of Yugoslavia. He said that we went to school together, we played sports together and intermarried. Now we play a deadly game called The Balkan Inn. Three men go into a room, the lights are turned out, knives are pulled – only one can leave. Isaenko also states:

“I remember how, during his 1993 visit to the Caucasus, my friend and benevolent colleague Professor Peter Petschauer told me that he was amazed at how the locals recounted their chosen traumas, some of which had taken place hundreds of years prior, as if they had just happened the day before.” (p. 297)

This author learned that if you grew up in Serbia, you were told that in the 14th century the Ottoman Empires’ Turkish army defeated the Serbs in a battle. The Serbian bodies were irreverently left unburied on the battlefield for blackbirds to feast upon. When Yugoslavia fell apart, Serbs shelled Muslim areas of Sarajevo until only rubble remained. NATO responded by engaging in a successful cyber war, disrupting the Serbian military’s communications, grounding the Serbian air force and bombing infrastructure targets and the Serbian military without opposition. Slobodan Milosevich who served as President of Serbia was captured and sent to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, The Hague, Netherlands to be tried as a war criminal. Hostilities ceased.

Never forget. Wait for revenge.

Isaenko responds to this hostile state of affairs by citing the recommendations of three American scholars. Carol Barner-Barry and Cynthia Hody call for a “Political Culture of Democracy and a Road Map for the Countries of Post-Soviet Space to Heal the Violent Ethnic Conflicts.” Among their recommendations is: “Different racial, religious, or ethnic groups should live together in peace and a spirit of mutual trust.” Second is the advice of Arend Lijphart creating in multiethnic states a policy based on “a consociational democracy model.” There should be: “Cooperation among political elites to the formation of coalition governments and executive power sharing.” Establish: “A high degree of autonomy for each ethnic community to run its own affairs.” (p.307)

None of the countries in Isaenko’s area of inquiry are listed by Freedom House as being democratic, i.e., “Free.” Russia, Crimea and Azerbaijan are rated “Not Free.” Even the Ukraine is listed as “Partly Free.” According to Freedom House in the Ukraine “corruption remains endemic.” “Attacks against journalists...members of minority groups are frequent, and police responses are often inadequate.” (freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world2021/democracy-under-siege)

This author would rate the Ukraine followed by Georgia and Armenia as possible candidates for the Isaenko conflict resolution suggestions. Maybe North Ossetia, but the remainder are unlikely, not impossible, entries for the peaceful resolution of ethnic conflict. Maybe they all have reached a necessary point for the settlement of differences without external interference. Isaenko’s plan would be a good starting plan for a move toward peace. However, let us remember the distinction between *de jure*, by law, and *de facto*, fact. Nations can pass laws, but if they are not supported by the people in the culture, reality will be the wall that is hit by hope.

References

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