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### **BOOK REVIEW**

Пятидневная война. Россия принуждает к миру,  
М., Европа, 2008, 184 с.;

В. Быкова, Н. Давлетшина (составители).

День катастрофы–888. Остановленный геноцид  
в Южной Осетии, М., Европа, 2008, 192 с.

The Five-Day War. Russia Enforces Peace. Moscow,  
Evropa Publishers, 2008, 184 pp.;

V. Bykova, N. Davletshina (compilers);

888—the Day of Catastrophe. Cutting Short Genocide in South Ossetia.  
Moscow, Evropa Publishers, 2008, 192 pp.

Reviewer: A. Shved. This review appeared in Russian in the journal *Svobodnaya mysl*,  
No. 10, 2008.

In post-Soviet history August has long been perceived as a month of misfortunes: it was in August that the Soviet Union began slipping toward its breakup; it was in August that the five-day war in South Ossetia in fact drew the line under the shared history of the formerly fraternal peoples. A superficial observer might refer the war to the history of the Russian-Georgian relations, yet it cut deeper than that. From the very beginning the brief fierce conflict was part of a wide context stretching far beyond the confrontation between two post-Soviet states.

Russia won the war of August 8-12, 2008; officially, it did not go to war against Georgia; nor did it fight the Georgian people. It was “merely” engaged in an operation designed to force the Georgian leaders to restore peace; it moved in to defend the life and dignity of its citizens and the Russian peacekeepers, the victims of an unprovoked attack. The war in South Ossetia was the first military operation of the Russian Federation beyond its borders; it was for the first time that the country was involved in large-scale hostilities in the post-Soviet expanse against its former compatriots. The passions had flown high; the tension did not subside several months later: action was merely moved

away from the military into political and diplomatic spheres. This review was written at the time when the PACE was engaged in active political discussions; a motion (obviously doomed to be soft-pedaled) to deprive the Russian Federation of the right to vote in the PACE was tale-telling.

So far no objective discussion of the Caucasian context is possible: the emotions are too fresh while the situation is too hot for this. We should also bear in mind that a neutral position might cast doubt on the absolutely justified actions of one of the sides to give a chance to the opposite side to discredit it. We have accumulated enough information to supply relevant conclusions and sum up the situation to a first approximation. It seems that Evropa Publishers was guided by these considerations when publishing the two books devoted to the August 2008 drama in South Ossetia.

The first of them, *The Five-Day War. Russia Enforces Peace*, can be best described as a reference book. The first chapters analyze the military balance in the conflict zone and describe the TOW; they also contain a day-by-day chronology of the warfare based on media reports and expert opinions. By way of conclusion the authors offer the Declaration of President Dmitry Medvedev on recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and some quotes from the interview Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave to CNN. The Appendix contains the chronicle of events, the table of organization of the 58th Army of the Russian Armed Forces, of the Georgian troops involved in the conflict and the armed forces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The compilers of the second of the reviewed books, *888—the Day of Catastrophe. Cutting Short Genocide in South Ossetia*, described it as a “white book” of ethnic purges of Ossets. It covers the period between the 1920s and the present, contains a wealth of facts, statistics and eyewitness accounts. The compilers also relied on the book *Georgia: Ethnic Purges of Ossets* (in Russian).

Let me repeat: so far no unbiased discussion is possible for several reasons which accounts for the somewhat one-sided descriptions of what happened in South Ossetia. It is clearly seen in the manner of placing emphases on some or other items. They speak of the Ossets’ tolerant treatment of the Georgian population, in particular, the shuttle traders who profited from the disparity in prices in Tbilisi and Tskhinval (*888—the Day of Catastrophe*, p. 20) and of the aggressive anti-Ossetian propaganda of the Georgian authorities. The authors also point out that, unlike the Georgian military, the Russian troops did their best to avoid casualties among the civilian population in the villages from which the Georgian artillery was shelling the enemy positions and selected the sparing regime of fire activity (*Five-Day War*, p. 24). On the whole, the authors have offered a truthful account of the facts based on eyewitness accounts.

The history of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict goes back into the distant past; the authors relate it to the early 19th century when Georgia joined the Russian Empire and when Princes Machabeli claimed several villages in the territory which is today South Ossetia. This explains why in the late 1980s—1990s, under President Gamsakhurdia, the Georgians started calling South Ossetia Samachablo (Machabeli possessions). The book asserts that allegedly in 1830 the Russian government resolutely dismissed the claims and ruled that the Georgians had no rights to South Ossetia (*888—the Day of Catastrophe*, p. 12). The authors, however, failed to refer the reader to a historical source and therefore the information remains unchecked.

The first serious conflict broke out in the early 20th century when, in 1920, Georgia, ruled by Mensheviks,—aptly described by a foreign eyewitness as a “smaller imperialist nation,”—moved its regular troops into South Ossetia under the pretext of quenching the Bolshevik uprising. Tens of thousands were thrown out of their homes, villages were burned down; over 5 thousand Ossets lost their lives. A special commission set up in Soviet Georgia assessed the losses at 3,317,516 gold rubles (a huge sum at that time).

Under Soviet power Georgia continued its discriminatory policy in relation to the national minorities in its territory; South Ossetia was reduced to the status of an agrarian and raw material appendage. It had to survive on the minimal of funding and their more or less effective enterprises moved to the central regions of Georgia. In 1949 Georgian was imposed on Ossetian schoolchildren (including primary schools) as the only language; in 1951 it was introduced in the official capacity as the language of documentary exchange (888—the Day of Catastrophe, pp. 54-55).

In the late 1980s radical nationalists headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdiya came to power in Georgia. Under the slogan “Georgia is for the Georgians” they embarked on the road toward independence by cruelly suppressing the national identity of the Abkhazians and Ossets. In 1991-1992 Georgian nationalists carried out numerous acts of genocide in South Ossetia, all of them registered by human rights activists; over 100 thousand Ossets became forced migrants—they had to abandon South Ossetia and Georgia’s inner regions. The authors point out that the Center (Mikhail Gorbachev and his closest circle carried away by the struggle against Boris Yeltsin) should share the blame with the Georgian leaders for what was going on in Georgia at the time. “The Kremlin said in so many words: ‘Until you sign the Union Treaty, until you take part in the all-Union referendum the problems in South Ossetia and Abkhazia will remain unsettled.’ This meant that bloodshed would go on.” (888—the Day of Catastrophe, p. 92). Since that time South Ossetia that defended its right to independence in a cruel war with Georgia has not spent a single day as part of the Republic of Georgia.

Georgia’s aggression against South Ossetia began much earlier than the small hours of 8 August, the official date of the Georgian attack at South Ossetia. At least a week earlier the situation had begun moving from bad to worse. Contemporary historiography calls the period between August 1 and 7 the “Sharpshooter War.” Shelling from both sides became much more frequent; the number of dead and wounded was rising. On August 7, at about midnight, the Georgians announced an operation of “restoring the constitutional order” in South Ossetia under the pretext that the breakaway region had refused to abide by the ceasefire conditions. The Georgians used heavy artillery and multiple fire rocket launchers to shell Tskhinval.

From the point of view of international law Georgia was wrong: having launched full-scale fighting, it violated the ceasefire in the conflict zone established by the Dagomys Agreements of 1992 and the sides’ later international law obligations. Georgia shelled the positions of the Russian peacekeepers who were stationed in the conflict zone in full accordance with international law and with an agreement from the Georgian side. Dozens of Russian peacekeepers were killed. There is a moral aspect too: Georgia attacked the civilian population in violation of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

The above was more than enough to justify a peace enforcement operation. On 8 August at 04:00 a.m. Russia's representatives tried to convince the participants in the extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution condemning Georgia's actions. The result of long discussions (the meeting ended at 10:00 a.m.) was "concern over the situation in the conflict zone." This and later Western media coverage of the South Ossetian conflict came as an unpleasant surprise for the Russian leadership. The country was facing an information war. From the very beginning till the end of the war the Georgian position dominated in the West; the Western media merely ignored the Russian point of view. Contrary to the traditions of the Western "free press" there was no mention (no matter how negative) of the Russian arguments.

It should be said that the Russian Foreign Ministry was partly responsible for this, for it had failed to provide a timely and clear legal description of the situation. It was indulging in emotional assessments; it relied on the government of South Ossetia to quote the figure of 2 thousand dead in Tskhinval. When it turned out that the figure had been overstated, the legitimacy of Russia's response was doubted together with it.

In the "Foreword" to 888—the Day of Catastrophe prominent Russian political analyst Modest Kolerov convincingly proved that these conclusions did not hold water: "When Saakashvili was accused of genocide on the strength of facts, certain people accustomed to measure genocide against the Holocaust or genocide of the Armenians started counting, with a great deal of reservation, the number of Ossets killed in August 2008 as a result of the Georgian aggression... They believed that it was not the intention that counted but the number of the dead... Under the Convention [on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.—Ed.] 'genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempt to commit genocide, complicity in genocide' are punishable. I am sure that what Saakashvili, his allies and patrons have done fully fit the above" (pp. 8-9).

The authors of the Five-Day War positively assess the foreign policy results of the war in South Ossetia. "The voice of Russia became louder" (p. 4), it "has demonstrated to the world that it should be reckoned with. As a result of the operation the deterrent factor became much more obvious after the period when even the smallest of Russia's neighbors stopped taking it in account" (p. 137). The rigid response of the world community to Russia's actions revealed serious faults in its foreign policy doctrine. In an effort to build up most pragmatic relationships Russia lost many of the old allies (in the near abroad, in the first place) while its potential partners are watching with concern (or even with a great deal of hostility) how Russia is gaining weight on the international scene.

The Russian Army alone is beyond reproach; the peace enforcement operation should be regarded as a great success of the Russian military command. At the same time it has become obvious that we should revise some obsolete tactical and strategic standards and stereotypes. In particular, the use of strategic TU-33M3 bombers for reconnaissance: one of them was lost in the mission. The commanders of the Russian armed forces admitted that the technical level of some of the units used in the operation left much to be desired and that their military equipment had not been changed since the Afghan war. Navigation equipment and equipment needed to suppress enemy radars are obviously outdated; the army needs its own global positioning system. It was decided to upgrade the level of combat training of the effective force (Five-Day War, pp. 132-137).

There was an illusion that the postimperial expanse had settled down, and the blows delivered by the former fraternal nations while the Soviet Union was leaving the stage of history became a thing of the past. Today, however, we have seen another flare-up that can be described as inevitable, logical and tragic. It is destroying not only the historical and cultural ties but, most important, human contacts and relations that have taken centuries to be established. In this sense the Russian-Georgian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts mark the beginning of the end not only of the Soviet but also of the post-Soviet tradition. We are gradually forgetting the things that kept us together. What is even more important is that a new generation that enters upon active life looks at the common past as ancient history (something like the Punic Wars).

This can or cannot be accepted, yet it should be taken into account. When the wounds heal and the passions calm down (this will happen sooner or later, whether the US sponsors of Saakashvili want it or not) we should find new strength to build up pragmatic relations based on mutual interests and respect for state territory and territorial integrity (as seen by the peoples who do not want to detach themselves from historical Russia, no matter how it is called, rather than by schizophrenic nationalism of the Georgian leaders and, regrettably, a large part of the Georgian people—a painful discovery indeed.