

Hewitt, George. *Discordant Neighbours: A Reassessment of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian Conflicts*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. 389 pp. \$152.00, ISBN 978-90-04-24892-2.

After the 2008 war in South Ossetia, asserting the relevance—or even existence—of separate Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts, as opposed to a single Georgian-Russian conflict, was quite unpopular in many Western analytical (and especially policymaking) circles. Next to the easy reading of the ready-made script of Russian neoimperialism on offer from President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration in Georgia, trying to discern distinct Abkhazian or South Ossetian concerns, agendas, or grievances was definitely the more onerous option, especially without actually going to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Having survived the wars of the early 1990s and two decades of excommunication from the international community, Abkhazia and South Ossetia now found themselves in the unenviable position of being all but invisible in the flurry of post-2008 commentary.

Hence the reassessment in the title of this volume, written by a leading specialist in Caucasus languages and prominent advocate since the early 1990s for the Abkhazian cause. This book is written as a corrective to what the author decries as Western naïveté and misplaced faith in Georgian leadership and democratic credentials, insufficient acquaintance among international audiences with the virulence of Georgian nationalism in the late 1980s and, consequently, the resulting insecurity experienced by minorities in the Georgian republic, and overemphasis on Russia's role in the conflicts and determining their outcomes. Hewitt's goal is to reinstate Abkhazian and South Ossetian voices and provide context for internal Georgian debates, which in the author's view has been absent, by making full use of Georgian-language sources. Therefore, this book promises a

long overdue counterpoint to the typically superficial treatment of local conflict drivers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It is a shame, therefore, that the reassessment offered does not go as far, or as deep, as it might have done. Hewitt fearlessly dispenses with any theoretical concerns in the preface, promising the reader that this book will be a “wholly theory-free zone”, a pledge on which he makes good. Rather, the guiding animus of this book is that “facts, as facts, need to be made known, especially when they have been so often deliberately distorted, misrepresented and misreported over the years” (ibid.). Beyond their deliberate distortion, the slipperiness of facts in a context of conflict is a possibility that is not broached here. The nature of the reassessment on offer, therefore, is not methodological or of theoretical cause and effect, but of perspective: this is a book written from the perspective of an ardent advocate of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence from Georgia, and everything flows from this premise.

This approach implies a kind of methodological cost that becomes more apparent as one reads on. *Discordant Neighbours* does not engage with the existing social science literature on the conflicts and does not offer any theoretically informed socioeconomic, institutional, or geopolitical analysis. There is no overarching framework, other than (presumably the author’s) common sense and, at various points, what appears to be close to a “national character” explanation of ethnic conflict focusing on negative traits in the Georgian national character. This makes this book’s contribution to the wider social science literature on the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts difficult to identify. Instead, the book is structured as an ongoing chronology of events, with the narrative emphasis consistently drawn to key factual misrepresentations in (particularly) Georgian-Abkhaz affairs, in order to correct them, and put the record, as the author sees it, straight. As a result, it is the polemics and musings of nationalist intellectuals to which Hewitt is repeatedly drawn, rather than cause, effect, or intervening variables.

Those who know Hewitt’s earlier articles on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict will find much that is familiar in the first hundred-odd pages. He charts a narrative of the Georgian colonization of Abkhazia, understood as a separate national homeland since ancient times. While Hewitt rightly rebuts, as Kevin Tuite and others have done, spurious Georgian theories of the Abkhazians’ non-indigenesness, there is a complexity and fluidity to the historical relationship between Abkhazian and Georgian polities and elites that the modern ethnic categories around which this narrative is structured cannot capture.

Moving to the 1980s, the author makes ample use of Georgian written sources of the era. Sure enough, there are rich pickings in the immature imaginings and condescending attitudes of many in the Georgian intellectual establishment from the late 1980s and early 1990s, cited here at length. Unfortunately, there is no effort to unpack, deconstruct, or explain the genesis and dynamics of virulent nationalism; here one finds only refutation. The use of local Georgian-language sources dries up considerably in later chapters, which rely mainly on internet sources. There is no evidence in the text of fieldwork or data-gathering in Georgia after the early 1990s. This means that the voices of those many Georgians soberly reflecting on the course of their nation’s history, especially in the post-2008 period, are absent from these pages.

The principal contribution of this book is in the rich array of Abkhazian sources referenced throughout. The author is indeed in a unique position to deploy these sources, and he does so with aplomb. While undoubtedly romanticizing the Abkhazian cause, the author presents a clear picture of consistent, consecutive Catch-22 situations that Abkhazians have confronted since the late 1980s, and their, on the whole, skilful and resourceful responses to them. However, some readers, and not only Georgians, may find the persistent disdain toward Georgia and “the Georgians” and the occasional triumphalism permeating this book not only off-putting, but compromising with regard to the many arguable, but nonetheless valid, points being made.

An aspect of this book sure to arouse controversy is its treatment of Russia’s role. While the corrective to the exaggerated emphasis on Russia’s role in the 1990 wars is justified (and shared by many other scholars of Georgia’s 1990s conflicts), this approach is less adequate when it comes to the 2008 war in South Ossetia. Hewitt’s assessment of this war as “one more reckless gambit by a

flawed Georgian leader ... [ending] in total and ignominious failure” surely captures only one part of the story; there is seemingly no desire here for a fuller picture (p. 255). The notion of Russia “making amends” for Stalinist wrongs with its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia stretches credulity and speaks of an ideological, not analytical, approach (p. 356). Indeed, Hewitt’s account reverses the reification of Russia’s role in many pro-Georgian accounts: Russia is as invisible here as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in the works of those authors he has set out to reassess. The causal equation is correspondingly incomplete.

Sadly, South Ossetia is very much the runner-up in the allocation of space and detail in this volume. There is no evidence to suggest that the author has conducted fieldwork in the territory, and he largely restricts himself to citing from secondary literature in those parts of this work dealing with South Ossetia. A properly contextualized and empirically rich history of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, always the more elusive and more easily manipulated of the two, has yet to be written.

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Hill, William H. *Russia, the Near Abroad, and the West: Lessons from the Moldova-Transnistria Conflict*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. xx + 271 pp. \$55.00. ISBN 978-1-4214-0565-0.

This book, a narrative focusing on the southwestern confines of the “Russian space,” is an event unto itself: a must-read, full of inside information, for any student or scholar studying Moldova, Transnistria, and de facto statehood (particularly de facto statehood under Russian supervision), and all tinged with an awareness of Russia’s perception of the West. It also should be read, and maybe even re-read, by any scholar, student or erudite observer with an interest in Eastern Europe.

As a research volume interwoven with many elements of a professional memoir, the book has a specific approach based on the authors’ personal values and formative experiences. One such experience is reflected in William Hill’s use of the name “Transdnistria” in the very title and throughout the book in general. A blending of the international “Trans” and Russian “Dniester,” which is less and less used by Moldovans living on the right bank of the Nistru River, the author writes that he keeps to this form for reasons of “neutrality, consistency and stubbornness” (p. xiv), which, although not a plea for neutrality, can be attributed to some sort of comfort of conviction among the staffers at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Although neutrality is hard to maintain when dealing with entrenched discourses in a protracted conflict, Hill could have offered more explanatory insights on the use of this most common word of his book, if only because Transnistria is de jure part of Republic of Moldova and could be referred to according to the legal authority’s own terminology. A presupposed reason could be the reference to “Transnistria” in Western historiography on the Holocaust, although the author is not explicit about that.

The volume’s structure is easily grasped. The first three chapters describe the complex relationship between Russia and the West during the 1990s and first half of 2000s. They bring nothing new to the debate, but they cogently contextualize the main foundation on which the patterns of Russian interaction with the West occurred and the permanent form it took after the series of events now conventionally called the “Kozak Memorandum.” The gist of the book comes in the ensuing chapters, where the author transforms the dynamics of the protracted Transnistrian conflict into a barometer of Russia’s mercurial relations with the West. The crescendo of events surrounding the Kozak Memorandum of 2003 is described in detail, with inside information to which the common observer normally has no access. The author broadly uses conversations, discussions (closed or otherwise), and personal reports, interlacing these with the visions, ambitions, and interests of Moldovan, Transnistrian, and Russian stakeholders as expressed during the negotiations aimed at solving the conflict. Hill’s own contribution to events provides food for thought, eventually compelling the reader to ask to what degree the personality heading the OSCE is shaping the policy