

Zürcher, Christoph: *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York and London: New York University Press 2007. ISBN: 9780814797099; 303 S.

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Once with „The Post-Soviet Wars“, Christoph Zürcher brings into the international relations framework a refreshed account of the organized violence in the Caucasus region after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The purpose of this book, as Zürcher notes is to shed light into the causes of the internal wars that took place between 1988 and 1997 in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Chechnya. The guiding questions that make up this research are meant to highlight how well the existing theories of internal conflict are able to explain the course of action in the post-Soviet wars, and also vice versa, how the study of these wars can contribute to the general theory.

Combining a normative standpoint with well-argued empirical proofs, Zürcher demonstrates that the above-mentioned conflicts do not support in fact two of the statistically best established claims of general conflict theory: the connection between mountainous terrain and the occurrence of internal wars, and the association between a low level of economic development and the emergence of war. The Caucasian conflicts took place in societies that were not poor in fact. It's true that they emerged in a mountainous landscape, but this just turned the conflict into a protracted one, while the intensive battles took place in the highly populated planes like in Grozny for instance. In order to bring proofs for these assessments the author treats each of these wars in an independent way, however without falling in the trap of a so-called Ptolemaic parochialism.

Regarding the conflict in Chechnya (chapter 4), Zürcher makes the case that in the domestic national discourse, the eternal war of the Chechens against Russia played an important role, as did the bitter memory of the deportations waged by Stalin. The book deals with both Chechen wars, 1994–1996, and 1999 onwards, also with the interwar pe-

riod, insisting notably on the causes that led to their emergence and the actual prolonging. Besides the informal economy that financed these wars, the author rightfully makes the point of the role played by the collective memory, and also by leaders such as Dudayev or Basayev. The economic resources extracted from the illegal and criminal economy were employed by such charismatic leaders to serve the wartime cause that was able to organize the fighters, donors and notably the civil society.

In the fifth chapter, Zürcher moves further and treats the emergence of wars in Georgia. The story of these wars highlights the pivotal role of the Soviet ethno federal system. The drama of the new state, as the argument goes results exactly from the collapse of this structure that guarantees to all the component territories linguistic and cultural autonomy. The birth of a sovereign Georgia with a nationalist policy is paralleled by the growing determination of forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia to achieve their own sovereignty. For Zürcher, the story of the Georgian wars is that of a failed transition state where the new leadership is not willing to cooperate with the old nomenklatura, nor capable or willing to find a solution for the shadow economy – namely tobacco and alcohol – that endangers the very existence of the state as the only entity that has the monopoly of the coercive power.

In the case of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh (chapter 6), Zürcher discusses the primacy of Karabakh-Armenian self-determination over the territorial integrity defended by the Azeri counterpart. Karabakh is a showcase of what happens when the central state loses both legitimacy and coercive power. Also, this conflict confirms the normative account on the internal wars regarding the ethnic settlement patterns and demography. The relevant literature argues that there is a heightened risk of secession and conflict when ethnic groups live in a homogeneous area and when an ethnic group has a „co-ethnic big brother“ in the neighboring state (in this case Armenia) that is willing to support its cause.

If not a novelty, it is to be appreciated the author's idea to bring forward two cases of potential regional wars that were avoided: in

the North Caucasus Dagestan and in South Caucasus Ajaria. In the case of the former, the argument goes that ethnically highly fragmented societies are actually less vulnerable to internal wars than are less-fragmented societies. In the second case, Ajaria remained stable due to the nonpoliticized nature of the cultural differences between Ajars and Georgians, even if confessionally the Ajars are Muslims and Georgians Christian Orthodox.

One of the remarkable strengths of the writing is the clear focus on the domestic level of analysis. Christoph Zürcher argues extremely well the internal organization marked by the disruptive regime transitions from 1988 onward with paralyzed Soviet state institutions, while the young successor states are not yet capable of effectively carrying out key state functions.

Also, it is visibly clear the intention to pinpoint to the risk and consequences of the new asymmetric wars, where paramilitary groups and guerilla attacks challenge the mere existence of a sovereign state, as was thought in the case of Georgia in the last decade.

For those who want to find predictions in this book, the author leaves this task to the reader. The causal relation between ideas and the course of action is the point where the writer stops. Nevertheless, Zürcher never pretended that the book should be seen as a policy paper, but an account of the causes and cases of fragmented societies where lack of cooperation and continuity between the incumbent elites and the old nomenklatura leads to incoherent and failed policies.

The author emphasises very well the emergence of a new type of violent political entrepreneur endemic not only for the Caucasus region, but also for Yugoslavia and other conflicting areas: the patriot-businessman. He combines military skills, a sharp instinct for business opportunities, often charisma and capacity to attract masses.

As for the rebel movements, Zürcher clearly makes the right point that these ones do not have their origins in rural elites, as some might think, but on the contrary, they are initiated and led by the provincial urban intelligentsia. The rural milieu is just a recruiting base, where the kinship and family ties facilitate the cohesion of the youths in the fight for

what they believe to be a common cause.

Due to the fact that the book was published in 2007, it is understandable that the author did not talk about the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia nor about the current situation of the statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Even if after the dismantling of the Soviet Union, books, articles and brief accounts kept being written on the existing conflicts in the Caucasus region, Christoph Zürcher through his book „The Post-Soviet Wars“ updates the reality, bringing a plus of empirical proof, and most important developing a critical view of the pretty much unchallenged theory of internal wars.

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