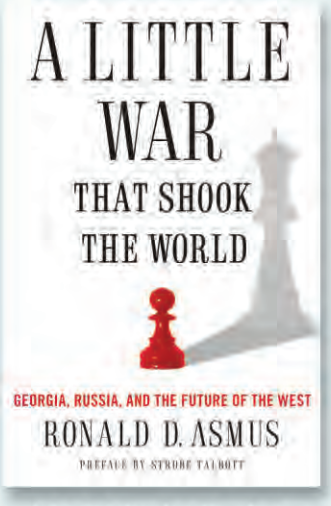

A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West
By Ronald D. Asmus
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Reviewed by
JAMES THOMAS SNYDER

Ronald Asmus was recruited to the Bill Clinton administration State Department in 1997 from the RAND Corporation, where his writing on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion attracted attention. During the next 3 years, he worked to open NATO's door eastward. As Executive Director of the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. office in Brussels until his death in April 2011, Asmus opened discussion on the future scope of the Alliance and European Union (EU) in the Balkans and beyond the Black Sea.

With this book, Asmus offers the first comprehensive political analysis of the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the most serious blowback against Western power in Europe since the end of the Cold War. This small war caught by surprise nearly everyone not personally involved in trying to avoid it. Like the other guns of August, the tragedy is that it should have been averted.

Russia prepared meticulously for an opportunity to crush Georgia and its Western aspirations. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili had been well warned not to pick a fight with the Russians. While not falling into a trap—Asmus assiduously defends Saakashvili and his decisions—the president nonetheless sent his small and ill-prepared forces into the maw once the decision was made to preempt Russian forces massing near Tskhinvali. Asmus argues that Saakashvili believed there was really no choice. He could go on the attack with the advantage of surprise, or wait to be crushed by invasion.

But Georgia had virtually no air force and only five mechanized brigades—one a training brigade, one deployed to Iraq, and all prepared for counterinsurgency rather than armored warfare. They faced a joint force of the well-equipped 58th Army, elements of the Black Sea Fleet, and forward-deployed bombers and attack aircraft. Most of these forces had just finished a major exercise preparing for precisely the scenario they faced on August 9.

With the Georgian offensive, Russian forces attacked along two fronts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Only the latter was contested by Georgian forces, Asmus notes, providing evidence of premeditation. Russian naval units landed marines at Ochamchira in Abkhazia and bombers attacked targets across the country, flying 400 sorties in 5 days, including 120 sorties on August 9 alone.

The Russians have been critical of their own performance, particularly given their overwhelming superiority. Georgia claimed 17 shootdowns, including a Backfire bomber. Russian armored and mechanized units faced constant breakdowns and could not coordinate with their air forces.

But nothing effectively prevented Russian forces from dismembering the country and taking Tbilisi. Georgian defensive lines were broken in 2 days, and the leadership was in disarray. Only the rapid and extraordinary political pressure brought to bear by the EU, led by the irrepressible French President Nicholas Sarkozy, appears to have held Russia back.

Not enough credit is given to the French president, or to the EU, for the effort to end the war. Without coercive power at their disposal, it was a dramatic feat of diplomacy. But Asmus is right about the consequences of the EU's lack of leverage: Sarkozy's prime imperative to end the conflict drove a diplomatic settlement that heavily favored Moscow. The six-point agreement was left vague enough to put the region's most intractable cold conflict in deep freeze.

Everyone lost this war, Asmus argues, the West included. That probably overstates the case. Georgia clearly lost, with its territory annexed, its military destroyed, and no strong advocate to move westward. Russia won only through massive advantage and was punished by isolation for its aggression. The war led to enormous capital flight, and following a collapse in oil prices, Moscow discovered that its newfound power was largely ethereal.

Traditional friends, mostly border states, were deeply alarmed by Russia's action against its neighbor. NATO, the EU, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe all condemned Russia and sided with Georgia. Moscow learned the hard way that real power only comes through relationships, and its new position as pariah stung.

Russian aspirations are a reality of the new century, but so are those of Georgia. NATO and the EU are also fixed realities with which Russia must contend. Its recent rapprochement—signing the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, commemorating the Katyn Forest massacre, and marking Victory in Europe Day with allied troops marching for the first time in Moscow—may be the first steps toward reconciling these essential truths. **JFQ**

James Thomas Snyder served on the International Staff at North Atlantic Treaty Organization Headquarters in Brussels from 2005 to 2011.