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Author(s)	Blakkisrud, Helge
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Ali Askerov, Stefan Brooks, and Lasha Tchantouridzé, eds., *Post-Soviet Conflicts: The Thirty Years' Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), xxii+376 pp.

Few divorces are amicable. This is true for both couples and states. For empires and multinational states, the break-up may prove particularly nasty, often marked by widespread violence and bloodshed. During the first five years after Yugoslavia began the protracted and painful process of dissolving into its constituent republics, civil and interstate wars caused more than 123,000 deaths, slightly above 0.5% of the pre-war population. However, the parallel break-up of Europe's other communist multi-ethnic federal state, the Soviet Union, proceeded remarkably swiftly and peacefully; here, during the same period, the death toll due to ethnic violence and war was estimated at somewhere in the range of 175,000–225,000, or 0.06–0.08% of the population at the time of the break-up.

The Soviet divorce proved far more peaceful than most observers had initially feared, but the region was nevertheless hit by several violent, albeit geographically contained, conflicts in the form of ethnic secessionism and civil wars, some of which remain unresolved low-intensity conflicts to this day. Even now, thirty years later, the phantom pains associated with the Soviet break-up continue to haunt the no longer "newly-independent" states; as of this writing (summer 2021), we have recently seen border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for control over water and territory, resulting in at least 55 casualties and more than 40,000 people being temporarily displaced.

In *Post-Soviet Conflicts: The Thirty Years' Crisis*, edited by Ali Askerov, Stefan Brooks, and Lasha Tchantouridzé, a team of fifteen experts on post-Soviet conflicts takes stock of the conflicts that have flared up in the ruins of the one-time empire. Their aim is to cover *all* post-Soviet territorial conflicts (there are, however, some surprising omissions, such as the 1992 East Prigorodny conflict between the Ingush and the Ossetians and the 1991–1993 Georgian Civil War). All of these conflicts, spanning from Transnistria's attempt to break away from Moldova in the west, across Russia's annexation of Crimea and the various secessionist attempts in the Caucasus (Abkhazia, Adjara, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia), to the communal clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Jalal-Abad in the east, have been extensively covered in existing literature, often in greater depth and detail. The great advantage of *Post-Soviet Conflicts* is that it presents all these conflicts together within a single volume; their shared Soviet past offers an ideal baseline for comparing conflict trajectories across cases, thereby seeking to explain why some conflicts were resolved while others have remained simmering for decades.

In their introduction, the editors state that "the volume avoids trivial discussions on ethnic identities, instead it focuses on factors that have contributed or may contribute to the resolution of the post-Soviet conflicts" (p. x). They do not offer a theoretical framework regarding how to approach the individual conflicts, but present three assumptions intended to inform the subsequent analyses: that most, if not all, conflicts "have their roots in Soviet policies or political processes," that "the conflicts have originated as a result of clashes between two or more population groups with distinct national identities," and that "post-Soviet Russia has played some role in all these processes" (pp. xii–xiii).

The result is a mixed bag of case studies. Most accounts are empirically focused, with no explicit anchoring in theoretical perspectives—unfortunately, sometimes not even in existing research about the conflict in question. Some contributions focus solely on the active phase of the conflict, as with Robert Bruce Ware's detailed chronicling of conflict development in Dagestan in the interim between the First and Second Chechen Wars. Others look primarily at root causes or post-conflict situations. In Idil P. Izmirli's account of the Crimean conflict, the 2014 annexation is presented as just one in a series of disasters that have hit the Crimean Tatars since the establishment of the Crimean Khanate in 1440. Malte Müller and Sam Whitt, on the other hand, are more interested in the long-term effects of the Tajik Civil War than in the war itself.

More importantly, the ambition of looking beyond "trivial discussions on ethnic identities" in order to focus on conflict resolution is rarely followed through. In most chapters, ethnicity is very much present; in some cases, the authors approach the national community as something fixed, natural, and ancient. Few seriously engage in a discussion on how ongoing conflicts may be de-escalated. While this volume does offer some pertinent examples of conflicts that were resolved *before* turning violent (the potential secessionist conflicts in Tatarstan and Adjara, covered by Zurab Tchiaberashvili and Sait Ocakli, respectively), lessons drawn from these cases are not picked up by the other authors or the editors.

This is unfortunate. Some chapters offer nuanced and thought-provoking analyses that add new dimensions to our understanding of the conflict in question, such as S. Neil MacFarlane's analysis of Georgia's changing strategic context, Lasha Tchantouridzé's account of the South Ossetian attempt to secede from Georgia, and Joldon Kutmanaliev's study of communal violence in Kyrgyzstan. As a collective effort, however, this volume represents a missed opportunity. There is no concluding chapter drawing together insights from across the cases or attempting to theorize upon the conflict dynamics at play in the post-Soviet world. The comparative potential is thus lost.

The volume could also have benefited from heavier editing to avoid repetition and to ensure greater consistency across chapters. The state of the index is indicative: in a volume dealing with conflicts and war, the index suggests that we turn to page 305 for "armed conflict." Under the letter A, we find similarly unhelpful keywords such as "alarming situation, 341" and "asking Dagestanis, 193."

Post-Soviet Conflicts fails to deliver on its promise to discuss ways out of these conflicts, but it does offer a wide range of perspectives and approaches, and some highly interesting individual contributions. Let us hope that this volume can inspire future studies that will utilize the possibilities for comparison offered by the post-Soviet space.

Helge Blakkisrud