

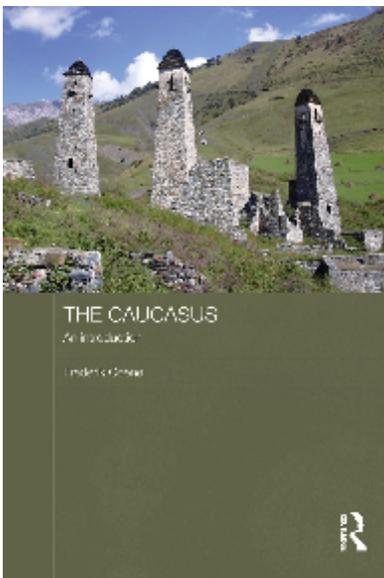
BOOK REVIEW

THE CAUCASUS: AN INTRODUCTION

BY FREDERIK COENE

(New York: Routledge, 2009, pp. 256, ISBN978-0-415-48660-6, \$130.00)

*Review by Alexander Jackson**



Frederik Coene is no stranger to the Caucasus. Currently the Attaché dealing with post-conflict assistance in the European Commissions' Mission to Georgia, he has also worked in organisations on both sides of the Caucasus Mountains, dealing with conflicts and developments. It is unfortunate that Mr Coene's on-ground experience – he worked in the North Caucasus during the savage violence of the Beslan school siege, for instance - does not always come through in this informative, but sometimes slightly shallow, volume.

To be clear, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* is intended to be just that. Mr Coene sets out his aim at the beginning: a thorough introductory volume which would “provide factual information [and also] help the reader to understand the Caucasus a bit better”. The author argues that, for all the books on the Caucasus, there are none which combine and link the many different aspects of the region into a whole.

This is true to a great extent, but without the analysis which Mr Coene states he will not offer, it becomes difficult to link the different chapters - geography, administration, population and society, history, conflicts, international politics, economy, and culture – together, leaving him open to the same charge as his critics. Each chapter stands more or less alone.

Indeed, the main accusation that could be leveled at this volume is that its strength – its broad sweep – is also its weakness – a lack of any thorough assessment. The ongoing violence in the North Caucasus, a near-continuous cycle of insurgency and repression, is offloaded in a few dry sentences. Of the dynamics of the insurgency – the replacement of Chechen nationalism with extremist Islam, the huge upsurge in violence in Ingushetia and Dagestan (in particular) – Mr Coene says very little. Given his first-hand knowledge of the situation, these passages are crying out for additional colour and information. Although the danger of trying to write on current events is obvious – the references to the Georgian war are necessarily brief and already partly

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outdated – there was ample scope for more dynamic writing on the region’s contemporary challenges.

The desire to cover so much ground inevitably leads to a lack of focus. The historical section is a dizzying blur of kings, with different empires rising and falling in the space of a few pages. To be sure, the evidence for many of these states and individuals is often scarce, and reading about the ebb and flow of Kartli or the Safavids may be a useful primer, but it cannot be much more than this. The chapters on conflicts and international politics – probably the most relevant chapters for the lay reader – lack the depth and analysis required to make them truly valuable reading. It may seem odd to some readers that the chapter on conflicts is only four pages longer than the chapter on geography, for instance. Indeed, a focus on geographical and administrative issues weighs down the first part of the book. The book is targeted at the lay reader, but it is hard to imagine many lay readers wishing to know about soil types or the structure of the legislature in Krasnodar Krai.

However, these criticisms should not detract from the book’s merits. Its breadth is a drawback, but it is also a strength. Seldom in one volume has there been such an array of information gathered on the Caucasus, and as a reference volume, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* is very useful indeed. But as an in-depth analysis of the region’s challenges, opportunities and ongoing dynamics, it leaves something to be desired.

About the author

Frederik Coene is currently Attaché dealing with post-conflict assistance in the Delegation of the European Commission to Georgia. His research on the Caucasus began in 1999 during his internship in the Office of the Secretary-General at NATO Headquarters. Since then he has researched, worked and travelled in all parts of the Caucasus.