

New York Times' Roger Cohen on Georgian crisis: A case of deliberate deception

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Since shortly after the August 7 attack by Georgian forces on South Ossetia triggered large-scale fighting between Georgia and Russia, major US media outlets have overwhelmingly presented the crisis as a simple case of Russian "aggression."

Mobilizing so huge an apparatus as the US media behind Washington's propaganda line is a complex process, and not every journalist functions as a conscious agent of US imperialism. However, the manipulation of US public opinion does require conscious deception and bad faith from prominent figures within the media establishment.

The *New York Times*, among the most prominent organs of American liberalism, has played a critical role in legitimizing the US government's position. Its September 1 column by "International Writer-at-Large" Roger Cohen, headlined "NATO's Disastrous Georgian Fudge," is an example of the *Times*' deliberate campaign of disinformation on the Georgian crisis.

Cohen begins by attacking the April, 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, where the US secured a general statement favoring the eventual admission of Georgia and Ukraine into the US-led military alliance, but failed to obtain European agreement for rapid NATO membership for the former Soviet republics. Cohen writes: "In retrospect the NATO summit declaration of April 3 about Georgia and Ukraine seems almost criminal in its irresponsibility: 'We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.'"

Cohen does not denounce the NATO summit for stoking tensions with Moscow by declaring its agreement in principle to NATO membership for the two unstable countries on Russia's borders. Rather, Cohen is upset that the European powers, by refusing to agree to a membership plan for Georgia and Ukraine, broadcast NATO's internal divisions and deprived Ukraine and Georgia of a near-term guarantee of NATO military intervention in the event of an external attack on either of the two countries. He writes: "The great Bucharest fudge succeeded only in infuriating the Russians without providing the deterrence value of concrete steps for Georgia and Ukraine."

At this point Cohen waxes indignant: "Blood has been shed, Georgia's borders trampled, and its breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia recognized by Russia resurgent... I'm appalled by what Russia has wrought in Georgia."

Cohen's outrage is, of course, highly selective. The use of force and the violation of borders in the Caucasus appall Cohen, but he

never criticized such actions by the US in the Balkans.

Cohen is well aware of the US role in the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Washington and its European allies tore up Yugoslavia's borders, provoking a series of bloody civil wars, by fostering in turn the secession of its constituent republics Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. Cohen covered Yugoslavia for the *Times* in the early 1990s and in 1998 wrote a book on the subject, *Hearts Grown Brutal: Sagas of Sarajevo*.

In his book, far from denouncing the recognition of breakaway provinces of Yugoslavia and the resulting bloodshed, Cohen criticizes NATO for not acting more aggressively against Serbia and the Yugoslav central government in Belgrade. Soon after the book's publication, Washington acted along the lines favored by Cohen, launching a ten-week air war against Serbia in support of secessionist forces in the Serb province of Kosovo.

Cohen's September 1 column is silent on the Georgian government's responsibility in triggering the current crisis, and the complicity of the United States in the military attack launched by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili on South Ossetia. An unsuspecting reader would conclude that Russia had violated "little Georgia's" sovereignty out of pure malice and lust for power.

There are no innocent explanations for this omission. Cohen is well connected in European media circles, which have carried several important reports on Saakashvili's role in provoking the Russian intervention.

After serving as *Times* bureau chief in the Croatian capital of Zagreb in 1994-5, Cohen was Paris bureau chief until 1998, and Berlin bureau chief until 2001. He is also editor-at-large for the *International Herald Tribune*, a Paris-based sister paper and subsidiary of the *New York Times*. Cohen is well aware of European reports on Georgia's role in starting the war, and has deliberately chosen to conceal this information from his readers.

On August 18, the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder gave an interview to *Der Spiegel* entitled "Serious Mistakes by the West." Asked who was to blame for the Georgian crisis, Schröder responded, "[T]he conflict has had several historic precursors. But the moment that triggered the current armed hostilities was the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia. This should not be glossed over."

Schröder stopped just short of accusing the US of encouraging Saakashvili to attack South Ossetia, saying, "[E]veryone knows that these US military advisors in Georgia exist—a deployment that

I've never considered particularly intelligent. And it would have been strange if these experts had not had any information [of an upcoming Georgian attack]. Either they were extremely unprofessional or they were truly fooled, which is hard to imagine."

Der Spiegel returned to the question of the outbreak of hostilities in a long August 25 article headlined "The Chronicle of a Caucasian Tragedy." The article documents the growing tensions between Georgia and Russia in the months preceding the eruption of fighting, paying particular attention to a three-week US-Georgian military exercise in July involving 1,000 US troops and named "Operation Immediate Response." It explains that, starting in 2006, the Georgian military was making plans for a 15-hour blitzkrieg to seize and hold the Roki Tunnel, the main road link through the mountains separating Russia and South Ossetia.

On August 30, *Der Spiegel* reported on internal documents leaked by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), confirming Georgia's role in provoking the war and reporting that the OSCE had evidence of Georgian war crimes. *Der Spiegel* has not yet posted an English translation of the article, "OSZE Beobachter machen Georgien schwere Vorwürfe" ("OSCE monitors make serious charges against Georgia"). The article's conclusions were rapidly reported in other European media, however, including the French dailies *Libération* and *Le Monde*.

These reports in the European press are, of course, advancing definite interests. Russia is the European Union's largest source of both oil and natural gas imports (29 and 44 percent, respectively, of total EU imports). Europe's businessmen and politicians have benefited handsomely from links to Russia, with Schröder, who made millions as a board member for the Russian gas firm Gazprom's North European Gas Pipeline Company, key among them. European politicians are alarmed at the prospect of a military stand-off between their largest energy supplier, Russia, and their main military ally, the US.

This does not, however, invalidate the European media's investigations of Georgia's role in provoking the crisis, which virtually all press outlets that have given accounts of the August 7 events have admitted.

Many of these reports have also prominently noted the visit to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in mid-July, when she stood side by side with Saakashvili and reiterated US support for the rapid admission of Georgia into NATO and bolstered Saakashvili's campaign to reestablish Georgian control over the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The visit was a diplomatic provocation against Russia. There can be little doubt that it included detailed discussions of plans by the US client regime for an imminent attack on South Ossetia.

Having covered over Georgia's role in starting the fighting, Cohen attempts to present the crisis as largely a product of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's personality. Putin is an "angry man," Cohen writes, continuing: "The full story of what turned Putin cannot yet be written. Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' of 2003 [a US-backed coup that installed Saakashvili in power] and Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' of 2004 were critical. Iraq played a part. I'm sure the huge amounts of money accruing to the

managers, Putin chief among them, of a controlled, one-pipeline Russian state did, too."

What Cohen presents as a list of Putin's personal frustrations is, in fact, a partial outline of aggressive measures taken by the US aimed at breaking up the ex-USSR, gaining control of the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Basin by means of export pipelines through the Caucasus, and encircling Russia with US and NATO military installations. This was described more frankly in a November 2005 analysis by the Stratfor web site, which has close links to the US intelligence community.

Stratfor wrote: "The Soviet Union was one of only three states that have ever directly threatened the United States—the other two being the British Empire and Mexico. The Soviet Union also came as close as any power ever has to uniting Eurasia into a single integrated, continental power—the only external development that might be able to end the United States' superpower status. These little factoids are items that policymakers neither forget nor take lightly. So while US policy toward China is to delay its rise, and US policy toward Venezuela is geared toward containment, US policy toward Russia is as simple as it is final: dissolution."

Cohen comes from a social milieu so implicated in the functioning of US imperialism that he can unhesitatingly present such policy as moderate, even overly timid. He therefore closes his column with a plea for the West not to be "cowed," and to more consistently pursue its interests in the former Soviet Union.

He writes: "[The West] must shore up the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, with financial and other support. It must keep the trans-Caspian, Russia-circumventing energy corridor open. It must bolster Ukraine's independence. And, at the NATO foreign ministers' meeting in December, it should replace Bucharest blather with basics: a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine [to join NATO]."

The recklessness of Cohen's appeal is staggering. Had the April summit admitted Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, the US and its European allies would now be under treaty obligation to support Georgia with military force against Russia, directly posing the risk of nuclear war.



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