

A Bittersweet Postcard from Athens - Dimitrios Triantaphyllou



This August like every August has not permitted us to relax even though most of us would have preferred, at least for a few days, to decompress. The month started off somewhat well with the Summer Olympics being held in a European city which allowed us to follow for hours on end a bevy of sporting activities on television without disrupting our sleep patterns. In the meantime, we were deluding ourselves. The great Umberto Eco wrote in September 1990 an article titled "There are no news in August" where he meant exactly the opposite as his intention, in a tongue and cheek fashion, was to criticize his country's mainstream media that had downgraded the relevance of the start of the Gulf War of August 1990 and most references to Italy's active role in it, so that Italians could enjoy their well-deserved down time.

Barbara Tuchman in her seminal book *The Guns of August* focusing on the causes leading to the start of the Great War in 1914 describes how the Great Powers were sleepwalking while making fatal errors of judgement and specious calculations that led their nations to a long and deadly war while they thought that the conflict would be both of a short duration and relatively contained. Tuchman's book, first published in January 1962, deeply affected President John F. Kennedy's thinking in his efforts to manage the 13-day long Cuban Missile Crisis of October of that year in order to avoid it from evolving into the first global war of the nuclear age.

The parallelism with today's prevailing conditions in the wider Middle East as well as the Russian-Ukrainian front is unquestionable. Will Iran with its various satellite terror groups respond to the many (either officially recognized or implied) Israeli targeting of high ranking Iranian, Hamas, or Hezbollah officials in response/retaliation to the terrorist attack of 7 October 2023 as well as its inability via the bloody campaign in Gaza to exterminate Hamas and the clear and present danger it represents to the security of Israel? Or will Tehran's theocratic regime prefer the "humiliation" of a response that will be measured in order to avoid the making of a wider conflict that it may not be able to reign in? What will be the response of Israel and other state and non-state actors in the region? Will a wider war be avoided yet again? Until when, if the current bloody cycle does not stop?

On the Ukrainian front, the clashes and bloodbath have not stopped this August. In fact, they have intensified. Here too, the specter of a broader war hangs over the wider neighborhood. This August we have witnessed both the reception by Ukraine of the first batch of US-made F-16 fighter jets as well as an ongoing incursion by Ukrainian forces into the Russian city of Kursk, coincidentally the site of the deadliest and longest armored battle of World War Two in July-August 1943. Here too, we are faced with threats by Russian officials of the use of tactical nuclear weapons as well as other nightmarish forms of retaliation, including the spilling over of the conflict in the wider region, as these have persistently been expressed since February 2022 when the Russian aggression against Ukraine began. Will a more generalized conflict be avoided yet again? Until when?

This bittersweet summer, while we remain observers of wars in our immediate neighborhoods that could spin out of control, Europe finds itself in a period of transition, internal contradictions, and in standby mode. The United States, in the midst of a consequential electoral year, are witness to bitter contradictions with both identity and constitutional implications; the international markets are undergoing corrective trends with implications for vulnerable economies; Britain finds itself licking its wounds from the recent spate of violent racist clashes; Venezuela is confronting the aftermath of its recent rigged elections; in Bangladesh, the protracted social turmoil and clashes should raise alarm bells for the rest of the world, to refer to just a few of the newsworthy August developments across the globe. Closer to home, I could also allude to the shifting sands of Greek-Turkish relations which do not quite allow the construct of the December 2023 Athens Declaration to firmly cement itself or to the hope that the civil protection mechanisms in place will protect our lives and properties from the growing number of fires that threaten them ever more regularly as the climate crisis is a reality.

A general sense of apathy, the ineffectiveness of the policy and institutional responses to the growing, multiple, and complex challenges and crises, or the emphasis only on their management, and the hope (or wishful thinking) that logic will prevail should be a cause for alarm. Making it through another summer with the minimum of casualties, at least for us that are not immediately living the vicissitudes of man-made or natural fires, does not imply their resolution. The question that arises, at least on my mind, is whether we have realized that if we continue along the path of “business as usual”, Barbara Tuchman’s *Guns of August* will be heard again, either some future August or at some other time, in their most terrifying version and that it will be a long while before they become silent again. Sleepwalking or convincing ourselves that we are untouchable is a prescription for disaster.



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