Periphery of contact zone? The NATO flanks 1961 to 2013

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To cite this article: Evanthis Hatzivassiliou (2016): Periphery of contact zone? The NATO flanks 1961 to 2013, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2016.1168639

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1168639

Published online: 31 Mar 2016.

Article views: 8

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BOOK REVIEW

Periphery of contact zone? The NATO flanks 1961 to 2013, edited by Bernd Lemke, Freiburg, Rombach Verlag, 2015, 230 pp., € 34,00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-3-7930-9798-3

The bibliography on the Cold War alliances has significantly developed in recent years. The study of NATO allows scholars to broaden their research beyond national policies, and to trace the forging of Euro-Atlantic bonds which involved not only security but also values and world views. During the post-war era, it was becoming increasingly clear that the solutions to problems required wider international convergences. NATO was an intergovernmental organization and a military alliance, relatively cumbersome, in which national interest could not but play a major role. However, at the same time, it was a pivotal international process which allowed for the convergence of Western policies and world views, and educated the statesmen, officials and military of its members in the norms of this expanding international perspective.

This volume, edited by Bernd Lemke and prepared under the auspices of the Bundeswehr Center of Military History and Social Sciences, is a major contribution to the bibliography on NATO, the Cold War and post-war history. It expands the discussion to the alliance's two flanks, which have been relatively neglected in the bibliography, in view of the pivotal importance of the Central Front in which an East–West war would be decided. The volume boldly raises the theoretical dilemmas involved: Were the flanks the 'periphery' of the alliance or its contact zones? Most chapters are based on impressive, indeed exemplary, multi-archival research, whereas those chapters which attempt a bibliographical discussion succeed in placing the issues in perspective. Moreover, the decision to discuss both flanks is welcome. Their study has been rather unbalanced: the Northern Flank has become the subject of much scholarly debate, whereas the problems of the Southern one have been discussed in a rather fragmentary manner. Examining both of them in a single volume is therefore a welcome innovation of the book and greatly contributes towards a fresh approach.

The chapters point to the radical difference of the geographical, political and strategic context of the two flanks, which is the most intriguing element in their comparative discussion. Agilolf Kesselring and Gjert Lage Dyndal examine the functioning of the Northern Flank during the Cold War. Geographically close to the Soviet Union and feeling the burden of the Soviets’ crushing military superiority, it had to meet military challenges in two areas. In the relatively confined Baltic Sea, the presence of neutral states, the concept of the tripwire mechanism and West Germany’s eventual accession to NATO largely determined the balance. In this area, the Northern Flank needed to block the Soviets’ access to the North Sea and to prevent them from threatening Atlantic communications, although this task was the cause of important differences between the major and the local/smaller members of the alliance. Second, the Northern Flank’s ‘high North’ involved a completely different – indeed, largely futuristic – setting of huge Arctic spaces, sparsely populated and under extreme weather conditions, which however were becoming increasingly important in terms of access, control, reconnaissance and monitoring in the age of strategic bombing. The high North’s importance in the strategic balance meant that the Northern Flank was not merely a ‘periphery’ but effectively a crucial setting of the Cold War. In this respect, Dyndal makes a very important observation: in the era of flexible response, the flanks tended to become ‘independent theatres of war preparations’ (95) – a crucial proposition for a fresh interpretation. In a chapter on the post-Cold War era, Augustine Meaher discusses
the Baltic States after 1990, the only members of the alliance which are former Soviet territories. Both geographically and strategically, the Baltic States are crucial contact zones for the alliance.

During the Cold War, the Southern Flank had to deal with radically different realities. The Southern Flank also faced the major problem of military inferiority, and the alliance strategy was based on deterrence rather than on a realistic prospect for winning a shooting war in this area. Yet, in contrast to the Northern Flank, the southern alliance members did not have vast open spaces around them; the Mediterranean and the Middle East was an area of varied topography, and of cultural complexity and diversity, which furthermore was going through huge social and political transformations after the experience of decolonization. This opened new opportunities to the Soviets. The most important geographical peculiarity of the Southern Flank involved the fact that it was a contact zone not only with the Soviet bloc but also with the infamous ‘out-of-area’ regions, which always complicated the decision-making of a military alliance set to protect its own clearly defined treaty area.

These geographical peculiarities created important dilemmas in the alliance. This is the subject of Francesca Zilio and of Gaetano La Nave, who discuss Italian policy towards the Mediterranean from the early 1960s until the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the 1970s, during a period marked by the after-shocks of decolonization, two Arab–Israeli wars, the French withdrawal from NATO’s military command and the Soviet naval’s presence in the region. The authors point to the careful employment of multilateral processes, including NATO, by a member of the Southern Flank. Michael Schmid examines the expansion of US interest in the Middle East and South Asia, including the important dilemmas which arose during the Yom Kippur War and in its aftermath; these in turn tended to aggravate the potential dilemmas for NATO. Dionysios Chourchoulis explains the problems of the south-eastern area. Greece and Turkey had weak economies and proved unable to implement NATO’s forward strategy; they had to increasingly rely on the alliance’s rapid deployment forces, the credibility of which would depend on political will and the situation in other fronts. Effectively, the south-eastern area continued to rely on what Chourchoulis has termed ‘political stabilization’ and on deterrence, rather than on a clear-cut military strategy. Gökhan Özkan discusses Turkey’s points of tension with the US after the early 1960s. Stefan Maximilian Brenner examines NATO’s role in the Greek–Turkish dispute regarding Cyprus in the mid-1960s. The author correctly argues that the alliance was able to contain the conflict but not to resolve it. In this discussion, nevertheless, it is important to take into account the fact that Cyprus itself was an out-of-area region, which made it more difficult for the NAC to become more active; still, after the mid-1960s, the regular ‘Watching Briefs’ of the Secretary General greatly contributed in containing both the Greeks and the Turks, who knew that their conduct in Cyprus was being monitored by the alliance.

Expanding the discussion to the post-Cold War era, Hans-Peter Kriemann examines Germany’s role on the road to the Kosovo War of 1999, a turning point both for the alliance and for Germany’s assumption of its international responsibilities following reunification. Last but not least, one chapter, by Harald van Nes, provides for a welcome indirect comparison of crisis management in the Central Front – Berlin itself, which the author describes as an ‘open flank’ (185). Operation ‘Live Oak’ was set up by the occupying powers and was eventually joined by West Germany. This initiative derived from the special responsibilities of the US, Britain and France in Berlin, and was partially outside NATO procedures, but called for a measure of coordination with the alliance.

The volume fully meets the aims set out by the editor, Bernd Lemke, in the introduction: it expands the discussion beyond the Central Front, points to continuities and breaks, and does so from a profoundly international perspective. The book can become the pivot which will spark new scholarly debate on the Western alliance, transatlantic relations and contemporary
military history. It will certainly be compulsory reading for scholars of the Cold War, international history and international relations, but also for the students of the national history of the members of the two flanks.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1168639