

Tbilisi May Get Burned By CIA Murder Inquiry

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Georgian Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani wants to reinvestigate the unsolved murder case of a CIA operative who was shot in the head 20 years ago in the outskirts of Tbilisi. The intention to discover what really happened in 1993 is commendable, but can Georgia really handle the truth?

On Aug. 8, 1993, CIA bureau chief Freddie Woodruff, posing as a State Department regional affairs officer, went on a picnic with Eldar Gogoladze and two young women. He was shot dead that evening, and the man arrested for the murder was innocent. This is what we know for sure.

Since there were Russian bases in Georgia in 1993, Federal Security Service agents roamed the region like cockroaches. Igor Giogadze, the country's minister of state security, was trained by the KGB, and so was Gogoladze, with whom Woodruff spent his last day alive. Aldrich Ames, the infamous U.S. double agent, had just visited Tbilisi two weeks before

Woodruff's murder. In addition, the U.S., which loved then-President Eduard Shevardnadze, was encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence.

While there was a war in Abkhazia, an uprising in west Georgia and militias robbing everybody, the cops nabbed the alleged killer, Anzor Sharmaidze, in a matter of hours. He was a drunk 20-year-old who shot a round into a speeding car and hit Woodruff in the head, even though there were no bullet holes in the car. The scenario was good enough for the U.S. State Department, which ruled it "a random act of violence" with no political motive.

Nobody bought the official version, but there was too much geopolitic at stake. Sharmaidze served everybody's interests by being behind bars. If not for U.S. attorney Michael Pullara, who had been doggedly lobbying for his release, Sharmaidze would still be rotting in a Georgian prison. He was freed in October 2008 but has not been exonerated.

A reinvestigation could clear Sharmaidze of the murder, but it would also elicit a probe into Gogoladze, who made so many belying statements you'd think he was pathological. He's had an intriguing career — from the KGB to Shevardnadze's chief of security to vice president of the Cartu Group, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's bank.

The Justice Ministry may be earnest in getting to the bottom of the Woodruff case, but when it realizes this is really spy stuff it might take the FBI's lead by filing it "open unassigned" and walk away.

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