

9

After August 7: The Escalation of the Russia-Georgia War

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The sequence of events that led to the Russia-Georgia war is a matter of political contention and shifting blame, even though there is broad agreement on the narrative of the subsequent combat *per se*. Of course, the fog of war continues to obscure many details; staff documents are still secret on both the Russian and Georgian sides, as are figures on the exact number of men, tanks, and warplanes that were involved. However, there are good estimates on numbers and on the moves made by both sides in a short but eventful war.

The Strategic Mismatch

The Russians and their separatist allies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia prepared and executed in August 2008 a war which the Georgians did not predict or expect. The Georgians, until they were plunged headlong into the fighting, appear to have prepared only for a replay of previous confrontations in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions in the early 1990s, which had resulted in a military standoff with the separatist forces, who were supported to some extent by the Russian military and by so-called North Caucasian volunteers and Cossacks. But this time, the Russian military staged an all-out invasion, planning to totally decimate and destroy the Georgian military—in effect, a full demilitarization of Georgia, as well as to overthrow the hated pro-Western regime led by President Mikheil Saakashvili. For this purpose, the Russian staffs mobilized and prepared for action tens of thousands of servicemen from the Navy, Air Force, and Army. The Russian war plans also envisaged a possible escalation of the conflict with Georgia to involve the U.S. and NATO.

In the actual fighting in August 2008, the separatist forces that the Georgians had seen as their main adversary played only a supporting role as a vanguard to the Russians, to engage and draw the Georgian forces into

combat. Subsequently their role shifted to that of an auxiliary infantry. This strategic mismatch in perceptions and planning produced a disastrous result for Georgia and threw Western policy-makers into disarray and created utter uncertainty over what to expect from Russia in the Caucasus or elsewhere. This confusion persists to the present.

In public testimony before a parliamentary commission investigating the war with Russia, the Chief of Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces during the war, General Zaza Gogava, disclosed that “military and foreign intelligence information coming before August was not comprehensive enough to indicate that such a large-scale Russian military intervention was to be expected. We were not expecting what started on August 9 – a full-scale military intervention with the goal to take over the capital city, Tbilisi.” Gogava, as well as other Georgian officials who testified before the commission, divided the Russian military intervention into two phases—the first from August 7–9, and the second starting from August 9, when Russia launched what the Georgians term a “full-scale aggression.” The Georgian failure to predict the Russian intervention was attributable in part to intelligence failure. Indeed, Gogava complained ruefully that “In 2005 the intelligence unit in the Ministry of Defense had been disbanded.”¹

The secretary of Georgia’s National Security Council during the war, Alexander Lomaia (appointed Georgian ambassador to the UN in December 2008), testified that Russia used about a third of its combat-capable land forces in the operation against Georgia (“over 80,000 Russian servicemen were involved in all operations”) and that “neither we nor any foreign intelligence service had any information about Russia’s expected full-scale invasion and occupation of a large part of our territory – it was a shock and a surprise.” According to Lomaia, it was known that several thousand Russian troops deployed during the Kavkaz-2008 military exercises on Georgia’s northern border and in the vicinity of South Ossetia in July 2008, began moving through the Roki tunnel into South Ossetia on August 7, but the Georgian leaders believed they had enough troops to deal with such a force. Apparently, the Georgians did not notice a statement by General Yuri Netkachev that the number of troops involved in the Kavkaz-2008 exercises (8,000) “was officially underestimated.”² According to Lomaia:

“We can suppose that a political decision [on full-scale military intervention] was made in Russia on August 9 when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin arrived in Vladikavkaz; it seems that he was informed about the heavy damage inflicted on the Russian forces [already fighting in South Ossetia]

and it seems that the decision was taken after that to put into operation the plan involving a full-scale intervention."³

Georgian leaders did not fully understand Russian intentions, and made staggeringly erroneous assessments that led to strategically disastrous decisions. Georgian foreign intelligence service chief Gela Bezhuashvili, a former defense and foreign minister, in public testimony before the parliamentary commission stated that:

Our information suggested Russia was planning a military intervention. A decision was made in principle to carry out aggression against Georgia in the second half of 2007. Analysis of both open and secret sources indicated that provocations were being prepared in the conflict areas, involving training and arming of the separatists forces, as well as preparing Cossacks to intervene in the area of conflict. The mobilization of Russia's air force started at the Mozdok airbase in Russia's North Ossetian Republic. Russia's A-50 reconnaissance aircraft, which is an AWACS type spy-plane, landed in Mozdok on August 4 or 5th. It is capable of correcting [i.e. tracing] artillery fire.⁴

Bezhuashvili's assessment seems to be accurate, though some mistakes in it have never been corrected. For example, the old Russian A-50 AWACS is equipped with ancient electronics, cannot "see" anything on the ground, and cannot possibly "correct artillery fire." Such mistakes, apparently, led to disastrous misinterpretations. Bezhuashvili acknowledged that "an assessment of the expected scale of the aggression was not easy." As a result, according to Bezhuashvili, Georgian foreign intelligence did not foresee that war might break out in August. "We were expecting that Russia would escalate tensions in September, October or in November 2008." The Georgians did not foresee that Russia was planning an invasion on two fronts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) at the same time. To quote Bezhuashvili again, "we had no intelligence information that Russia was planning to occupy western Georgia - including Poti, Senaki and Zugdidi."⁵ Apparently, the Georgians did not take seriously a statement by Abkhazia's foreign minister, Sergey Shamba, made in May 2008, that "it will take us two days to go on the offensive into Western Georgia and create a security buffer zone."⁶

Georgia's defense minister during the August war, Davit Kezerashvili, told this author in Tbilisi in November 2008 that, "if we would have known the scale of the Russian invasion, we would have prepared defensive positions, trenches and dugouts." Several days later, Kezerashvili told the parliamentary commission that "Georgia's army was not prepared for conven-

tional warfare, as its training was mainly focused on lower-scale military operations and anti-terrorist operations. In principle, we knew Russia might attack, but I was not sure it would until August 7. Friendly Western nations all told us that it is impossible that in the twenty-first century Russia might initiate a direct intervention. We could have built fortified defense positions, dugouts and bunkers from Gori to Tbilisi and from Abkhazia to Kutaisi, but this could have led to panic [of the civilian population]."⁷ Therefore, nothing was built.

The massive Russian invasion caught the Georgians off guard and unprepared both strategically and tactically. Russia, led by former KGB agent Vladimir Putin, managed to hide its preparations and intentions not only from the Georgians, but also from Western governments and intelligence services. The Georgian military was ready for a mobile, mostly offensive war either in Abkhazia or South Ossetia, but not for simultaneous large-scale combat with superior, heavily armed, and air-supported enemy forces invading from Abkhazia and Ossetia, in other words, on both fronts at the same time. As Georgian forces pushed north into South Ossetia during August 8, they may have been prepared to fend off a limited Abkhaz assault against the heavily fortified upper Kodori Gorge, but a full-scale Russian invasion over the Inguri River to occupy western Georgia was surely a surprise. Because of this huge strategic blunder, from the very first shot in August 2008, the Georgians had no chance of successfully repelling the Russians. Political and military disaster was inevitable.

The Russian War Machine Goes into Action

Once the fighting was over, a Georgian parliamentary commission publicly scrutinized the events of the August war, though some of these proceedings in Tbilisi took place in secret. In Moscow, however, there were no public official hearings of any sort, or detailed official disclosures about the pre-war plan of combat or the actual course of the war. Moscow wanted its military action in Georgia in August 2008 to be seen merely as a reaction to "Georgian aggression" against Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, and against Russian peacekeepers in the region. However, this official Russian position ignores the simple fact that an invasion of such a magnitude would require long-term preparations involving the entire Russian military, including the Army, Air Force, and Navy.

In December 2008 President Dmitry Medvedev told Russian TV how Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov had reported that Georgian forces had begun an offensive in South Ossetia on August 7, and how he

(Medvedev) hesitated for several hours before giving orders to use force in response. According to Medvedev, the five-day campaign was effective, as it demonstrated the might of the Russian military and the valor of "our citizens and soldiers, who with minimal losses irreversibly crushed the Georgian war machine, restored peace and saved tens of thousands of people from extinction." Medvedev added that beforehand he had suspected that Saakashvili was planning military action, "so we prepared for that, and as a result of our preparations the operation was a success."⁸

Russia's top military commander, First Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of the General Staff General Nikolai Makarov, speaking to journalists in December 2008 about the need for urgent military reform, described some serious problems that had been encountered during the war in August. "Less than 20 percent of our units are battle-ready, while the rest have only officers without privates," stated Makarov, who went on to describe such skeleton or "cadre" units as "paper divisions." Officers who command each other have no experience in leading men and cannot command effectively on the battlefield in time of war. According to Makarov, during the war with Georgia, "We were forced to handpick colonels and generals from all over Russia, [men] who were able to command in battle; ...the commanders of the 'paper divisions', when they were given reinforcements of men and armaments... were confused and some [even] refused to obey orders."⁹ It is obvious that this process of expanding cadre units and preparing them for action, and of seeking out able commanders all over Russia, could not have begun in the early hours of August 8 while Medvedev was considering whether to go to war or not. Thus, Medvedev himself provides crucial evidence that Russia's planning for the August war began long before August 8.

During the day of August 8, Georgian forces moved north through South Ossetia, bypassing pockets of resistance from Ossetian separatists and Russian peacekeepers, while columns of Russian armor, troops, and heavy guns were pouring south through the Roki tunnel to Tskhinvali to meet the Georgians. Two days of intermittent fighting in and around Tskhinvali followed. Russia deployed armored and mechanized regiments of the 58th Army of the North Caucasian Military District, the 19th Motor-Rifle Division based in Vladikavkaz, and the 42nd Motor-Rifle division from Chechnya, as well as a battalion of the 33rd Special Mountain Brigade. Regiments of the IS 76 Airborne Division from Pskov and the 98th Airborne Division from Ivanovo were sent into action, as were the 45th Airborne Special Forces regiment from Moscow. The 22nd GRU Special Forces Brigade of the North Caucasian Military District from Aksay near Rostov-

on-Don, and pro-Moscow Chechen GRU battalions "West" and "East" (*Zapad* and *Vostok*) also saw action. Finally, heavy artillery and missile units of the 58th Army were deployed in South Ossetia, including a missile brigade armed with short and medium range Tochka-U (SS-21) and Iskander (SS-26) ballistic missiles.¹⁰

The Russian invasion was hampered by several factors. These included the single narrow road leading into South Ossetia from Russia, the movement of civilian refugees out of the battle zone, and the need to bring in supplies and take out the wounded. Old Russian tanks and armored battle vehicles often broke down, creating constant traffic jams south of the Roki tunnel.

The Russian military reported an almost total breakdown of military communication systems during the fighting in South Ossetia and that Russian commanders were using their personal mobile phones—which in South Ossetia were covered by Georgian mobile phone operators—in order to communicate with troops and commanders.¹¹ The Army chief General Vladimir Boldyrev who, from his headquarters in Vladikavkaz, directly commanded the joint forces that invaded Georgia, announced that the fighting revealed two main Russian military deficiencies: inadequate communications and a bad command system.¹² According to General Gogava, the Georgian side also had problems with communications: "We contracted [U.S. defense communications and information technology company] Harris Corp. in late 2006 to supply us with communications systems; we had a problem, since these systems need well-trained personnel."¹³

The skies were bright over Georgia in August 2008, allowing the Russian military to capitalize fully on its total superiority in the air. However, the outdated Russian Air Force is not equipped with aircraft capable of precise air support at night or in bad weather. August seems therefore to have been chosen as the time to invade because of its usually fine weather. This decision paid off. According to Gogava, "The largest casualties among the Georgian military were inflicted in the immediate vicinity of Tskhinvali as a result of air strikes."¹⁴

The Russian air offensive in Georgia was not without casualties. According to Gogava, the Russians lost 19 aircraft; according to Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, the number was 15.¹⁵ The Russian Defense Ministry officially acknowledged the loss of four aircraft, including one strategic supersonic Tu-22M3 (Backfire) bomber that was used to gather intelligence information and bomb the Georgians.¹⁶ There exist Russian expert reports which claim that up to eight aircraft were lost.¹⁷ According to the Defense Ministry's official spokesman, General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, the

Russian military were surprised by the Georgians' use of advanced BUK-M1 antiaircraft missiles; he also indicated that Russian aircraft suffered casualties mainly during the first day of fighting, when they were ambushed near Tskhinvali. According to Nogovitsyn, Russian military intelligence (GRU) had not reported that the Georgians had BUK-M1 and the Georgians did not switch on the BUK-M1 radars or otherwise reveal themselves until the Russian bombers were within strike distance.¹⁸ Nogovitsyn's comments disclose a serious lapse of communication procedure within the Russian military, since Georgia itself had officially reported the purchase of BUK-M1 anti-aircraft systems from Ukraine, and the sale was much discussed on Internet sites prior to the August war.¹⁹

The Russian Air Force still has hundreds of jets, but the number of well-trained pilots is limited. The Air Force's losses during its short war with Georgia were painful. To save pilots' lives, the Air Force decided after the war to buy Israeli-made spy drones in what would be Russia's first purchase of military hardware from the Jewish state, and the first major official procurement of weapons from a "Western" nation since 1945. Israel had previously sold drones to Georgia, which it used successfully both before and during the August war. Meanwhile, Russia's defense industry has failed to produce modern drones. Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin, in charge of procurement and armaments and negotiating the acquisition of a batch of different types of Israeli-made spy drones, told reporters in April 2009 that a firm contract had already been signed and further ones could follow. Popovkin ridiculed the performance of the newest Russian-made spy drone *Typchak* during the August war, saying that "its engine made a terrible noise that was audible 100 kilometers away." According to Popovkin, the noise of the *Typchak* scared both Georgians and Russians and the drone was badly damaged by friendly fire.²⁰

In spite of the mishaps, Russian military and political leaders were playing it safe in August 2008. They acted in a way that was reminiscent of the second Chechen war in 1999–2001, in the sense that they wanted to leave little to chance and therefore deployed an overwhelming force. Still, the single narrow approach road leading from the Roki tunnel through South Ossetia to Georgia proper created problems and dangers. Russian troops moved into South Ossetia steadily, but slowly.

Georgia Counters Russian Onslaught with Military Improvisation

According to Gogava, at 11:35 P.M. on August 7, President Saakashvili speaking in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief, gave the military three

orders. These were, first, to prevent all military vehicles from entering Georgia from Russia through the Roki tunnel; second, to suppress all positions that were attacking Georgian peacekeepers and Interior Ministry posts, or Georgian villages; and third, to protect the interests and security of the civilian population while implementing these orders. According to Lomaia, "the logic of our actions was to neutralize firing positions on the outskirts of Tskhinvali and try to advance closer to the Roki tunnel as soon as possible by circling around Tskhinvali."²¹

According to Kezerashvili, Russian infantry exceeding one battalion in size and more than 40 pieces of armor and heavy guns were deployed south of the Roki tunnel before August 7, while reinforcements were camped north of the tunnel, ready to be moved up. After the war, multiple reports and interviews given by Russian soldiers were published in different Russian newspapers, including the official Defense Ministry daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star). These provided first-hand evidence that Russian troops indeed began the invasion of Georgia and actually crossed the border through the Roki tunnel before the Georgian troops attacked the Ossetian positions in the Tskhinvali region.²²

Kezerashvili and his First Deputy Batu Kutelia (appointed Georgian ambassador in Washington in December 2008) told this author in Tbilisi, in November 2008, that on August 7 the Georgian military had a scout in position at the south end of the Roki tunnel who could not only monitor the movement of Russian troops and armor into South Ossetia, but also communicate the exact GPS coordinates of Russian tank columns that could be used to direct artillery fire using GPS targeting. Kutelia went on to say that the Georgians decided they could not miss this opportunity since they did not have such capabilities further south. The Georgian military swiftly moved up Czech-made Dana self-propelled howitzers and Israeli-made GRAD LAR long-range multiple rocket launcher systems. Bypassing Tskhinvali, these were moved instead to the Georgian-controlled enclave of Tamarasheni, north of Tskhinvali.

According to the "Timeline of Russian Aggression in Georgia," published by the Georgian government,²³ "At approximately 00:45 A.M. on August 8, Georgian forces fired artillery rounds at the invading Russian forces on roads being used by a Russian column already moving south of the Roki tunnel." According to intelligence information communicated to this author, the Georgian artillery and GRAD LAR armor-piercing cluster bomblets caused damage to advancing Russian armor. Indeed, the Russian military acknowledge that the Georgian artillery performed well during the

August war. However, the strategic goal of discouraging the Russians from continuing their overall onslaught was not achieved.

To fight in and around Tskhinvali the Georgians deployed their 4th Infantry Brigade, the Army Artillery Brigade, a separate tank battalion from Gori, the Gori-based Defense Ministry Special Forces Brigade, and Interior Ministry Special Forces. On August 8, after advancing into the conflict zone of South Ossetia, Georgian armed forces overtook a number of Ossetian villages around Tskhinvali. At approximately 11:00 A.M. on August 8, the Georgian forces secured the heights around Tskhinvali. Later, Defense Ministry forces and Interior Ministry Special Forces entered Tskhinvali, encountering resistance from Ossetian separatist and Russian peacekeeping forces. By midday on August 8, the first Russian reinforcements arrived into the Tskhinvali region from the north and west through the so-called Zara bypass road.

According to Gogava, "It was a mobile defense operation." There was no trench warfare. Russian and Georgian columns skirmished in and around Tskhinvali. Most casualties were inflicted by the Russian Air Force, and by Georgia's artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems. Ossetian forces supported by Russian peacekeepers continued to hold pockets of resistance inside Tskhinvali. On August 9, the commander of Russia's 58th Army, General Anatoly Khrulev, was wounded during hand-to-hand fighting that broke out when a column of troops he was traveling with was ambushed near Tskhinvali by Georgian forces.

The Ossetian fighters could not effectively resist the regular Georgian army and Special Forces. But the Georgians were increasingly overpowered and outgunned by the large numbers of Russian troops pouring into South Ossetia from the north. On August 8, Saakashvili declared a mobilization of the reserve National Guard. This turned out to be a total disaster. Reserve units clearly needed much additional training even to be used as auxiliary forces, but they were sent to the battle zone at Gori, south of Tskhinvali, which caused additional confusion. According to Kezerashvili, "The system of reserve forces failed and the command of the reserve troops and the National Guard failed; there was confusion and disorganization. One of the reasons was that the National Guard lacked experienced officers."²⁴ The 17,000-strong Georgian regular army was on its own, supported, according to Merabishvili, by up to 5,000 Georgian police officers with 70 armored vehicles.²⁵ Meanwhile, two thousand of the best-trained Georgian soldiers of the elite 1st Infantry Brigade were deployed in Iraq with U.S. troops. On August 10 and 11, U.S. transports flew them back to

Tbilisi, but by then the battle of Tskhinvali and the entire war had been lost.

Invasion from Abkhazia and Overall Georgian Defeat

By the end of August 9, the situation of the Georgian forces was fast becoming hopeless. High-ranking Georgian officials seem to believe that a turning point in fortunes happened after Putin arrived in Vladikavkaz and gave orders to begin a full-scale invasion. This notion is in all likelihood, however, an illusion. A massive pre-planned joint force operation was already in full swing, with tens of thousands of soldiers and thousands of pieces of heavy military equipment moving into battle along precarious mountain roads and no room to maneuver in that terrain. Additional Russian reinforcements could not have been rushed into Georgia, since the few invasion routes were already clogged up with traffic. Simply put, by the end of August 9, the Georgian leadership in Tbilisi could at last discern the original Russian plan for the invasion and, through the fog of war, could also more clearly see the war's likely outcome. All Putin could have done in Vladikavkaz on August 9 was to tell his generals to continue with the invasion, as they did.

The main mass of Russian troops that were designated to invade Georgia through South Ossetia had managed by August 10 to pass through the bottleneck of the Roki tunnel and was slowly closing in on Tskhinvali, mowing down the Georgians by overwhelming, though not very accurate, artillery and rocket fire, as well as aerial bombardment. Over 12,000 Russian troops with hundreds of tanks, armored battle vehicles, multiple rocket launchers, and heavy guns moved into South Ossetia and, beyond that, into Georgia proper. Several thousand armed Ossetians and other volunteer militias from the Russian-ruled North Caucasus supported the Russian forces as auxiliary infantry.

By August 10, the Georgian leadership received reliable intelligence that while Russian troops were pressing their way into the Tskhinvali area, an even bigger invasion force was rapidly assembling in Abkhazia, where there had not yet been any fighting. Moscow sent a diplomatic note to Tbilisi, announcing that from 4.00 P.M. on August 9, a naval task force had begun patrolling waters near Abkhazia, and declared a state of siege in regions of Abkhazia bordering Georgia.²⁶

In July 2008 the Russian Black Sea Fleet task force had left Sevastopol, Crimea, to take part in the Kavkaz-2008 military exercises. The Fleet was led by its flagship missile cruiser *Moskva* and included frigates, missile

boats, and large amphibious landing craft. An armored regiment of marines landed at the small Abkhazian port of Ochamchire, close to the border with Georgia. Infantry and armor of the 20th Motorized Rifle Division from Volgograd were moved into Abkhazia by means of the recently repaired railroad from Russia, and troops from the 7th Airborne Division were flown by transport jets from Novorossiysk to Sukhumi.²⁷ The sea landing and air transportation supplemented deployment by land routes, adding to their limited capacity and allowing a swifter aggregation of a credible assault force.

As discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume, Moscow had, on May 31, without warning sent a 400 man battalion of Railroad Troops into Abkhazia to repair railroad tracks and bridges from the Russian border clear to Ochamchire. The troops completed their task on July 30, 2008, just in time for the invasion.²⁸ Russian armor is traditionally moved in and out of battle zones mainly by railroad, and it is the task of special Railroad Troops to keep the tracks in repair and to organize makeshift armor battlefield disembarkment points. Russian highways are in poor condition, because during the Cold War they were seen as possible routes by which motorized Western armies could invade. There is still no highway connecting Moscow with the Pacific coast, for instance, but the railroads are in good condition and connect all strategic destinations. Because of railroad weight constraints, Russian tanks weigh less than 50 tons, their armor being thinner than that of their modern Western counterparts. In a war situation in Abkhazia, Russian tank columns would rapidly have destroyed the only coastal highway leading southward from the Russian border. The prior deployment of Railroad Troops and repairs of the tracks were an essential part of the overall preparations for serious armed action. In South Ossetia, Russian armor was forced to move from Vladikavkaz under its own steam. In the process it destroyed road surfaces and itself fell into disrepair, causing huge traffic jams.

Additional army, airborne, and marine troops reinforced the 3,000-strong peacekeeping force already in Abkhazia. In April 2008 the Russian Foreign Ministry accused Georgia of concentrating forces and weapons in the upper part of the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia and of preparing an attack.²⁹ Several days later, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced an increase of the peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia from roughly 1,500 to 3,000 men. An airborne battalion was moved close to the border of Abkhazia with Georgia—the Inguri River.³⁰

Russia deployed up to 15,000 troops in Abkhazia in total. The Abkhazian regular army, led by Russian officers, was also mobilized for armed

action; it included up to 10,000 soldiers and several hundred pieces of armor and guns. The overall number of Russian troops moved into Georgia in August 2008 amounted to 25,000–30,000, supported by more than 1,200 pieces of armor and heavy artillery. Also involved in the action were up to 200 aircraft and 40 helicopters.³¹ Together with crews of the Black Sea Fleet deployed for action, Air Force and logistics military personnel who took part in the fray but were not actually moved into Georgia, the overall number of Russian troops taking part in the war may be estimated to have been 40,000. In addition to this, 10,000 to 15,000 separatist militias and fighters acted as auxiliary forces.

The Georgians were falling back from Tskhinvali under Russian pressure and had neither ready forces nor prepared defensive positions to counter the imminent threat of a second invasion into western Georgia. On August 10, Lomaia announced that Georgia would observe a unilateral cease-fire and would move its forces out of South Ossetia.³² Georgian troops attempted to establish defenses outside South Ossetia; the last serious battle of the war took place in the Georgian village of Nikozi on August 10. However, Russian troops did not stop at the old cease-fire line in South Ossetia but instead pushed southward to the city of Gori.

On August 10, a Russian armored column crossed the Inguri River from Abkhazia into western Georgia. The local Georgian authorities and police offered no resistance, while the Georgian military withdrew ahead of the Russian advance. Over several days the Russian forces spread out without meeting any resistance, occupying Zugdidi, the port of Poti (the main base of the Georgian navy), and a large Georgian military base in Senaki. The Russian forces captured stockpiles of Georgian military equipment and destroyed the Senaki base.

On the eve of the August war, the Georgian navy had been small, armed with old ships which were not ready for serious action. Kutelia told this author in November 2008 that, at the start of the invasion, all seaworthy Georgian naval vessels were moved from Poti south to Batumi to be out of harm's way. The Russian Navy announced it sunk a Georgian "missile ship" during a naval encounter after the latter attempted to attack the Black Sea flotilla.³³ Kutelia asserts the Georgian Defense Ministry knows nothing of such an encounter. Georgia did have two small guided missile ships, one being an old Soviet craft called *Tbilisi* and the other an even older French-built ship, the *Dioskuria*. Both were left stranded in Poti and were sunk in port by the occupying Russian army. In the spring of 2009 the wrecks of the ships were auctioned off as scrap metal for \$61,000 in order to clear Poti harbor.³⁴ The naval encounter reported by the Russian navy in August

2008 was either a propaganda ploy or an illusion. After the war in August, Georgia disbanded its navy and handed over its surviving small ships to the local coast guard.

In August 2008, the Kodori Gorge was apparently the only well-fortified part of Georgian territory. It was also the only part of Abkhazia controlled by the Georgians. Since 2006 Abkhaz leaders in Sukhumi, together with Moscow, were demanding a Georgian withdrawal from this critical area. According to Merabishvili, "About 300–400 Interior Ministry troops were deployed in Kodori," but there were no army troops on the spot. From August 9–12, Abkhaz and Russian forces bombed and shelled the Kodori Gorge but, according to Merabishvili, the Georgian troops there were well entrenched and suffered no casualties. At the same time as the Russian troops were occupying western Georgia without resistance, they were moving forward to cut the only road connecting the Kodori Gorge with the rest of Georgia. Merabishvili ordered his troops and the local population to evacuate Kodori.³⁵

Retreat to Mtskheta: The Last Stand

On August 10, the Georgian forces began retreating from South Ossetia and on August 11 began an overall retreat on all fronts, concentrating forces for a last stand to defend the capital, Tbilisi. At the same time, they continued to observe their unilateral cease-fire in the hope that the West would press Moscow to cease its advance. On August 11, the Georgians abandoned Gori. Most regular army units retreated in an orderly fashion but elements of the ragtag National Guard fled from Gori in panic.

As the Russian troops rolled in on the heels of the retreating Georgians, their commanders, fearing further losses of manned aircraft, used SS-21 and SS-26 ballistic missiles to hit targets deep in Georgia. According to Merabishvili, some 60 SS-21 and SS-26 missiles were fired. Eyewitnesses reported that by August 12 the SS-21 ballistic missile batteries of the 58th Army Rocket Brigade were moved through the Roki tunnel into South Ossetia close to Tskhinvali from where they could hit targets in and around Tbilisi.³⁶

As the Russians captured Gori, they spread out in all directions, pursuing the retreating Georgians. There were reports that Russian helicopters fire-bombed forests in Borjomi National Park south-west of Gori. These attacks led Saakashvili to publicly accuse the Russian forces of "ecocide."³⁷ The exact reason for the alleged fire-bombing is not clear, but most likely had to do with other, more practical reasons than attempts to ignite bush fires

per se. The Russian helicopters patrolling the Borjomi valley could have used flares to deflect possible heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile attacks. The flares could have hit the dry wooded steep slopes of the Borjomi valley, causing fires that were subsequently controlled by the locals. Merabishvili told the parliamentary commission that after the cease-fire, Georgian tanks were hidden from the advancing Russians in Borjomi and also in Imereti in western Georgia. "The local residents knew where our tanks were hidden, but did not tell the Russians," stated Merabishvili.³⁸ The Russian attack helicopters may have been seeking the hidden Georgian armor that disappeared in the Borjomi valley and could have actually used missiles to attack suspected hidden targets in the local woods, causing fires.

General Nogovitsyn denounced as "disinformation" reports that Tochka-U (SS-21) missiles had been moved into South Ossetia and, likewise, accusations that Iskander (SS-26) missiles were actually used.³⁹ The Dutch Foreign Ministry nevertheless announced after an investigation that Dutch cameraman Stan Storimans and four other people were killed in Gori on August 12 (just before a cease-fire was announced) by an Iskander SS-26 missile armed with a cluster warhead.⁴⁰ The Russian Foreign Ministry replied that the evidence gathered by the Dutch was inconclusive.⁴¹ Apparently, the Russian command had been aiming at a Georgian military base near Gori but had missed and hit a residential area instead.

Central Georgia—from Tskhinvali to Gori and from there to Tbilisi—is mainly an open plain with scattered hills. It is good country for tanks and the Georgians had no chance of stopping the Russian advance, which was supported by air power. Several kilometers northwest of Tbilisi the road from Gori passes through Mtskheta—the ancient Georgian capital. At Mtskheta, the road to Tbilisi passes through a steep gorge surrounded by high mountains—a good natural defense position at which a determined force may stop an advancing superior foe. By August 12, the Georgian command had gathered most of its regular army and Interior Ministry forces at Mtskheta and in Tbilisi for a last desperate stand.

Kutelia informed this author in November 2008 that there existed no prewar prepared plan for the defense of Tbilisi or Mtskheta in August, and there were no prepared defensive positions or bunkers to shelter troops from Russian air attack. As they retreated in the face of the Russian offensive, the Georgians managed to withdraw most of their more modern heavy equipment. Kutelia said that while 42 tanks were lost in action—a quarter of the overall tank force—this included only two Israeli-modernized T-72s that were abandoned to the Russians in Senaki. Under orders from their superiors, the Georgian forces dutifully fell back, but the retreat rattled the

troops. It is not clear whether at this critical moment in the 2008 war they would have been able, under a relentless Russian attack, to hold their ground at Mtskheta, or if they would have caved in, exposing the capital of Tbilisi to occupation.

In any case, the battle of Mtskheta never took place. On August 12, Medvedev in Moscow announced the acceptance of a cease-fire plan brokered by French President Nicholas Sarkozy. At 3.00 P.M. on August 12, Russian troops were ordered to halt military activities.⁴² To be sure, even after this announcement Russian military columns continued to advance, to occupy more territory, and to plunder Georgia. While Russian forces turned a blind eye, Ossetian militias marauded and ethnically cleansed Georgian towns and villages inside South Ossetia and between Tskhinvali and Gori. But the march on Tbilisi was called off.

Instead Russian forces established so-called “buffer security zones” in Georgia around the territories of breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia, claiming that this was allowed under preexisting cease-fire agreements. On September 2, 2008, Putin announced: “There are no Russian troops left in Georgia - only peacekeepers.” Putin further stated, “There are no Russian troops in the Georgian port city of Poti - only peacekeepers nearby.” Putin insisted that “Russian peacekeepers” will stay in the “security zones” in Georgia and that on top of that Russia retained the right to impose “additional security measures” it has not yet used. Putin blasted the U.S. for sending humanitarian aid to the port city of Batumi in the south of Georgia on the Turkish border using armed naval ships. Putin stated: “We will surely answer, but in a way you’ll know later.”⁴³

During the occupation of the “buffer security zones” Russian troops captured or destroyed Georgian military equipment and munitions at bases in Poti, Senaki, and Gori. In Senaki the Georgian military had a center for modernizing Soviet-made T-72 tanks—installing Israeli-made night-vision and other modern electronic equipment. According to Kutelia, two T-72 tanks that were in the process of modernization and could not be moved were captured by Russian troops and taken back to Russia. Kutelia expressed the hope that since the computer displays of the captured modernized tanks used the Georgian alphabet, the Russians would not fully figure out how they worked.

In Poti, a week after Moscow accepted the cease-fire, Russian soldiers took about 20 Georgian troops prisoner and commandeered U.S. Army Humvees that were awaiting shipment back to the United States after taking part in anti-terrorist exercises with Georgian troops in July 2008. The deputy chief of Russia’s general staff, General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, who

acted as Russia’s main military spokesman during and after the war, announced the U.S. Army Humvees were military trophies and that the Russian military were investigating the Humvees “very interesting” electronic equipment.⁴⁴ The Georgian soldiers captured in Poti were handed back to the Georgians in exchange for the release of Georgian General Roman Dumbadze, who in 2004 openly supported the pro-Russian separatist leadership in the Georgian autonomous republic of Adjara against the Saakashvili government. In 2006 Dumbadze was sentenced to seventeen years in prison for treason by a Georgian court.⁴⁵ Aslan Abashidze—the warlord who ruled Adjara from 1992 to 2004—is at present in exile in Moscow. Dumbadze and Abashidze may in the future be used by Moscow to create another center of separatism in Adjara in addition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The main task of the Russian invasion was to bring about state failure and fully destroy the Georgian army and centralized police force. A failed Georgian state, torn apart by political rivalry and regional warlords, cannot ever become a NATO member and could be easier to control from Moscow. A General Staff military official told this author in Moscow after the August war that: “We had plans to capture large numbers of Georgian soldiers after pushing them out of Tskhinvali, but they retreated too fast.”

In addition to collecting “trophies” and destroying Georgian military bases and infrastructure, the occupation of the “buffer security zones” gave Russia control of the strategically important road and rail link, as well as gas and oil pipelines that connect the oil and gas rich Caspian region with the Black and Mediterranean Seas. The large Senaki airbase provided a direct air transport link with Russia proper, especially important since South Ossetia does not have a single airstrip and the airbases in Abkhazia are far from the Georgian border. The Russian troops occupied the Akhalkgori district that was inhabited by Georgians, but under Communist rule was officially part of South Ossetia. The Georgian population fled Akhalkgori and the Russian troops established an important base only several miles from Mtskheta. But there was a serious logistic problem—there was no road directly connecting Tskhinvali and Akhalkgori—the only way was through Georgian territory proper, using the “buffer security zone.”

The buffer zone around South Ossetia became a lawless area looted and ravaged by the Ossetian militia, while thousands of Georgian civilians fled in panic. In accordance with the EU-brokered cease-fire and under diplomatic pressure from the West, the Russians eventually withdrew from the buffer zones around the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in October 2008 as unarmed EU observers moved in. Before the withdrawal, Rus-

sian troops built a makeshift mountain road from Tskhinvali to Akhgori, but there were problems using it during the winter. As bad weather hampered the use of Russian airpower and snow covered the mountains between October and November of 2008, the Russian military could not continue large-scale military operations in 2008 and withdrew to consolidate their positions and establish military bases inside Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to the Georgian Defense Ministry, 170 soldiers were killed and 1,198 were wounded. Of the 170 killed, ten bodies are still not identified and are considered "missing in action."⁴⁶ One hundred and eighty-eight Georgian civilians, meanwhile, have been reported killed.⁴⁷ Mera-bishvili stated that fourteen Interior Ministry servicemen were killed during the war and 227 wounded.⁴⁸ Nogovitsyn announced that the Russian military had 74 dead, 19 missing, and 171 wounded.⁴⁹ The official Russian casualty figures were later changed to 71 dead and 340 wounded.⁵⁰ As time passed, the official Russian casualty figures continued to fluctuate without any official explanation. The latest available figure is 48 servicemen killed, which includes ten peacekeepers.⁵¹ Russia is known to be a nation with an unpredictably changing past.

Acting deliberately after the cease-fire, Ossetians took vengeance on Georgian villages north of Tskhinvali, razing them to the ground and forcibly expelling their population.⁵² Tens of thousands of refugees from South Ossetia have been resettled in newly-build makeshift houses in new settlements near the main road from Gori to Mtskheta. Claims by Russian and Ossetian officials that the Georgians committed "genocide" and killed some 2,000 civilians in Tskhinvali were never substantiated. After months of work, Russia's prosecutor-general's office that was investigating alleged "Georgian war crimes in South Ossetia" confirmed the death of 162 civilians during the war with Georgia in all of South Ossetian territory.⁵³ South Ossetia is today a barren, sparsely populated land, isolated from both Russia and Georgia, with the local Ossetians and occupying Russian troops surviving the 2008–9 winter under terrible conditions.⁵⁴

Why Did the Kremlin Stop the Advance on Tbilisi?

On August 12, when Medvedev accepted the French-brokered cease-fire and halted the advance on Tbilisi, high-ranking Kremlin insider and spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky told the radio station Ekho Moskvyy that at an "important meeting" on the same day there had been calls not to accept a cease-fire but to march on to Tbilisi and "maybe further than Tbilisi." Pavlovsky insisted that an influential group within the Russian leadership

wanted to press on to Tbilisi in order to permanently ruin Russia's relations with so-called "civilized nations" and wreck Medvedev's announced plans to modernize and westernize Russia.⁵⁵

Pavlovsky seems to be right in claiming that even after the war, there remained elements within the Russian leadership that believed the job had not been finished in August 2008. Russian leaders Medvedev and Putin genuinely hate Saakashvili. After the war in August, Medvedev declared in an interview with Italian RAI TV, "For us, president Saakashvili does not exist, he is a political corpse."⁵⁶ In March 2009 Medvedev reiterated: "We love and value the Georgian people. I do not want to have any relations with Saakashvili and will not communicate with him. But if, as a result of democratic processes, power in Georgia changes, we are ready for discussions."⁵⁷

If Saakashvili were to be removed from power, a squabble between multiple opposition leaders would be inevitable, and the Georgian state could weaken or disintegrate, allowing Russia to gain more influence in Georgia and restore its dominance in the South Caucasus. And a permanently unstable Georgia would never become a member of NATO.

The cease-fire in August 2008 left the strategically important Russian force in Armenia cut off, with no transit connections by land to Russia. The number of Russian soldiers in Armenia is limited to some 4,000, but during 2006 and 2007 large amounts of heavy weapons and supplies were moved into the country from Russian bases that were being closed in Batumi and Akhalkalaki. At present, there are some 200 Russian tanks, over 300 combat armored vehicles, 250 heavy guns, and other military equipment in Armenia—enough to fully arm a battle force of over 20,000 soldiers.⁵⁸ Furthermore, forces in Armenia can be rapidly expanded by bringing in manpower by air from Russia. Spare parts to maintain the armaments may also be transported by air, but if a credible land military transit link is not established in a year or two, there will be no possibility to modernize or replace old equipment. The forces would thus deteriorate, thereby undermining Russia's commitment to defending its ally Armenia and its ambition to reestablish dominance in the South Caucasus.

After the war in August, the Russian military staged its largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War, called Stability-2008. Maneuvers of units on land, sea, and air in Russia and on the high seas began on September 1, lasted over 2 months, and involved some 50,000 soldiers.⁵⁹ The scenario of Stability-2008 outlined a local conflict escalating into an all-out air, sea, and land war between Russia and the West which, in turn, escalates into a global nuclear conflict with the U.S. Shortly after the war with

Georgia, Medvedev explained that “we have seen how an absolutely real war can erupt suddenly and how simmering local conflicts, which are sometimes even called ‘frozen,’ can turn into a true military firestorm.”⁶⁰

As the Russian military staffs made preparations for the planned August 2008 invasion of Georgia under the cover of the military exercises Kavkaz-2008, additional strategic reinforcements were mobilized for a possible escalation of hostilities in the eventuality that Washington would offer Tbilisi assistance and get directly involved in the fray. In August 2008 Moscow calculated that Saakashvili was fatally undermined, “a political corpse” who was destined to fall. Hence there seemed to be no need to risk an escalating confrontation with the West by pushing on to Tbilisi.

In August 2008 the Russian forward troops near Gori found themselves at a distance of hundreds of kilometers, over very bad roads, from their supply bases. They were thinly spread out, and experienced severe logistical problems. They were forced to employ undisciplined Ossetian militias as auxiliary infantry as the Georgian regular forces concentrated to defend Tbilisi. Russia could have suffered a humiliating defeat at Mtskheta while, if victorious, marauding militias and hungry Russian soldiers would have plundered Tbilisi, inflicting lasting political damage.

There were therefore ample material and political reasons to take an operational pause and stop short of Tbilisi and full victory. In 2009, however, all these reasons began to evaporate: the overall Western reaction turned out to be meek and the risk of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the U.S. or Europe nonexistent. Saakashvili managed to survive in power, while the need for an offensive pause to supply forward units vanished as Russia established forward bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russian troops did not go to Tbilisi in August 2008, but this does not imply that they will never do so.

10

Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War Between Russia and Georgia

Paul A. Goble

Even before the guns fell silent after the Russian invasion of Georgia, a Soviet-era anecdote began making the rounds in the Russian blogosphere. According to the story, Adolf Hitler comes back from the dead and arrives in Moscow in time for the annual May Day parade. After watching the Soviet military parade, its tanks and missiles, for some time, the Nazi leader begins to smile. A Russian comes up to him and says, “I bet you are thinking that if you had had those weapons you wouldn’t have lost the war.” No, the late Nazi dictator responds, “I was just thinking that if I had had a newspaper like your *Pravda*, no one would have ever found out that I did.”

That story calls attention to three important aspects of the Russia–Georgia conflict. First, both Russian and Georgian leaders were convinced that the way in which the media treated the war was just as important as what took place on the battlefield in determining the winners and the losers. Second, both assumed they could control the media coverage far more effectively than in fact proved to be the case—not only because of the media operations by the other side, but because of the increasing multiplicity of channels, including the blogosphere where this old Soviet anecdote surfaced. And third, neither fully recognized the way in which the facts on the ground, for that reason as well as others, would overwhelm their information strategies both in the short term and especially over time.

However that may be, both the Russian Federation and Georgia engaged in an intensive information war before, during, and after the fighting raged, in order to define for their own peoples, their opponents, and the international community not only who won and who lost but, more to the point, who was the aggressor, and thus deserves blame, and who was the victim, and thus thereby earns sympathy. Because of the various asymmetries of the participants and because of it was part of a larger international conflict,