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AUGUST 7: HOW RUSSIA PREPARED AND LAUNCHED THE 2008 INVASION OF GEORGIA

DAVID BATASHVILI

103

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 has been the subject of much controversy. The information struggle over the control of the narrative about who, when and how started the war was launched even while the fighting was still raging and has continued throughout the entire post-war period.

Gradually, Russia, with its incomparably greater resources than Georgia, managed to gain a partial advantage in this information struggle, bringing a lot of ambiguity into the international narrative regarding the war. While Russia is still widely condemned for its 2008 aggression against Georgia, many place a portion of the responsibility for the start of the war on the Georgian government.

In some cases, this is politically motivated. Western supporters of a “normalization” of relations with Russia, especially prior to Moscow’s attack on Ukraine in 2014, chose to buy some of the Russian narrative about the war. Within Georgia, some political opponents of the United National Movement (UNM) – Georgia’s ruling party in 2008 – have been known to make statements blaming the UNM government for failing to avert the war with Russia and for the consequent Russian occupation of Georgian territories.

Still, not all of the ambiguity regarding the blame for the war has political motives behind it. Russia’s constant, systematic and vigorous efforts on the information front have produced a lot of genuine confusion on the matter. In the ongoing geopolitical struggle that is happening along Russia’s borders, this confusion is employed against Georgia as a weapon by the Russian diplomacy and propaganda machine.

Any conflict includes moves and counter-moves by all sides involved. At the same time, it is a historical fact is that **Russia’s regular military units, which did not have the status of peacekeepers, had invaded the territory of Georgia by August 7, 2008 without either permission from or notification of the Georgian authorities, committing an act of aggression under international law. Having done so, these invading Russian forces started a military offensive against Georgia that unfolded during the following days until the ceasefire on August 12. Another fact is that the Georgian military advance in the Tskhinvali/South Ossetia area started only from about 23:35 on August 7 – long after the Russian troops had already launched their invasion of Georgia.**

Russian information warfare and the willingness of some actors to comply, at least in part, with Moscow's narrative for the sake of their political purposes have put these facts under a cloud of confusion. Ten years after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, it is time to challenge this cloud with historical evidence.

The first of the main parts of this paper covers the diplomatic and military escalation between February and August 2008. The second part reports on the events of August 7 – the day the war started. The third part is dedicated to one more issue muddled by the information war – the military encounter south of Tskhinvali on the morning of August 8 between Russian troops that had peacekeeper status and the Georgian forces.

Part I. On the Road towards the Russo-Georgian War

The roots of the 2008 war go back to the early 1990s when the Soviet and then Russian security agencies treated Georgia in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in a manner similar to how they treated Ukraine in the Donbass region in 2014. Local separatists were developed, encouraged, supported and directed. When that was not enough, Russia involved itself in the conflict more directly. The final result was that most of Abkhazia and a large part of Tskhinvali Region were placed under an indirect Russian control through Moscow-backed rebels while most of the numerous Georgian population of Abkhazia was expelled as a result of a brutal ethnic cleansing.

Unlike modern Ukraine, Georgia of the early 1990s was largely diplomatically isolated. As a result, Russia succeeded in strong-arming it into accepting the presence of Russian peacekeepers in both regions. In Abkhazia, the peacekeepers were all Russian troops. In Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, the peacekeeping format was more peculiar and included three battalions: one from the Russian regular armed forces, an armed unit formally representing the Russian Federation's region of North Ossetia-Alania and a battalion from the Georgian armed forces.

Russia's subsequent policy towards Georgia was bad enough under the administration of Boris Yeltsin but when Vladimir Putin became Russia's Prime Minister in August 1999 and then President in the spring of 2000, things got even worse.

Relations between Russia and Georgia steadily deteriorated during Putin's rule. The Russian steps during the years up to February 2008 included,

among many others: the construction and development of military bases on Georgian territory beyond the control of its government;¹ the Russian General Staff's preparation of the plan for a war against Georgia;² arming, organizing and training rebel militias;³ bombings of Georgian territory by the Russian military aircraft;⁴ meetings of Russian officials, including Putin himself, with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia rebel leaders;⁵ political preparation for the recognition of the independence of these two Georgian regions;⁶ appointment of Russian military and security officers and other Russian citizens to top leadership positions within the rebel regimes, especially the one in Tskhinvali;⁷ and the distribution of Russian citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region.⁸

Diplomatic Escalation in 2008

The sharp escalation of events in 2008 specifically followed Kosovo's declaration of independence on February 17, 2008 and its subsequent recognition by most of the Western nations. Russia reacted as if it were a signal to move to a new stage of its actions against Georgia. Moscow's next steps followed in quick succession.

On March 6, Russia withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreement dating to 1996 which banned military, political and economic relations with Abkhazia's rebels by CIS member states.⁹ On March 21, the Russian State Duma (parliament) "adopted a resolution urging the government to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to protect its 'citizens' in these regions." On April 3, Putin sent a letter to the rebel leaders, promising to support them by means "not declarative but practical."¹⁰

The Russians were quite open about the connection between their actions in Georgia and Kosovo's independence. Even before the recognition of Kosovo, Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of the Russian General Staff, said that such recognition would "echo in other regions as well, including those close to Russia's borders," specifying then that he actually meant "Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria."¹¹ Behind closed doors the Kremlin's message was the same, as the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, discovered during his last meeting with Putin in February 2008 when the Russian President declared to his Georgian colleague that in response to Kosovan independence Russia would further undermine Georgia's sovereignty in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹²

Another trigger of Russia's activity was the prospect of Georgia joining NATO which Moscow decided was unacceptable. Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian envoy to NATO, stated on March 11: "As soon as Georgia gets some kind of prospect from Washington of NATO membership, the next day the process of real secession of these two territories [Abkhazia and South Ossetia] from Georgia will begin."¹³ After the release of the communiqué of the 20th NATO Summit in Bucharest on April 4, 2008, which promised Georgia eventual NATO membership at some point in future, the Russian President issued a statement saying that Russia would "provide effective assistance to South Ossetia and Abkhazia" in response to NATO's decision.¹⁴ On April 8, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that Russia would "do everything to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO."¹⁵

Moscow's major diplomatic blow against Georgia came on April 16, 2008 when Putin issued a decree instructing his government agencies to establish direct official relations with the rebel regimes in the two Georgian provinces. Georgia reacted by stating that Russia was seeking annexation of these Georgian regions. The EU, OSCE, NATO and the leading Western nations condemned Putin's move as well.¹⁶

Military Escalation in 2008 – Initial Moves

On April 17 – the next day after Putin issued his decree – 300 Russian troops arrived in Abkhazia and were stationed at a base in Ochamchire.¹⁷ The military escalation that culminated on August 7 with the start of the Russo-Georgian War had been launched.

On April 20, a Russian MIG-29 jet shot down an unarmed Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) that was on a mission observing the Russian military buildup in Abkhazia. Investigation by the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia confirmed that the jet that carried out the attack was Russian. Several more Georgian UAVs were shot down in May.¹⁸

Later in April, Moscow announced that it was deploying 400 troops of the 7th Air Assault Division (based in Novorossiysk) to Abkhazia. The move was made in violation of the CIS agreement on the peacekeeping operations.¹⁹ The Russian troops sent to Abkhazia in April 2008 belonged to the 108th Air Assault Regiment of the 7th Division.²⁰ Additionally, two companies of the Russian Special Forces (*Spetsnaz*) were also deployed to Abkhazia²¹ while other Special Forces troops were sent to Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.*

* See more on these Special Forces troops in the part of this paper sub-titled *Start of Combat between Russian Troops with the Status of Peacekeepers and Georgian Forces.*

The troop movements were accompanied by transfers of weaponry into Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. “Starting in late spring, the Georgians claim to have observed at least twenty-six large containers of Russian military equipment being brought into Abkhazia. Those illegal shipments included a large number of BMP/BTR armored vehicles, D-30 type howitzers, SA-11 BUK anti-aircraft systems, BM-21 GRAD rocket systems, and ZSU-23-4 Shilka anti-aircraft systems. Smaller quantities of the same weapons systems were imported into South Ossetia and pre-positioned in the Java district.”²²

An important development occurred on May 31, 2008 when the Russian Defense Ministry announced²³ the deployment of the Russian Railroad Troops to Abkhazia. The deployment involved 400 troops tasked with the rehabilitation of the railway between Sokhumi and Ochamchire²⁴ – a town in close proximity to the Georgian government-controlled territory.

This move violated Russia’s peacekeeping mandate²⁵ and was conducted despite the loud protests of the Georgian government. Georgia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigol Vashadze, commented that “no one needs to bring railway forces to the territory of another country unless a military intervention is being prepared.”²⁶ Russia’s action was also criticized by the international community, including the European Parliament resolution of June 5, which stated that “the present peacekeeping format must be revised since the Russian troops have lost their role of neutral and impartial peacekeepers.”²⁷ NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, said the deployment was “clearly in contravention of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “an escalating action by Russia.”²⁸

The Russian troops completed railway repairs between Sokhumi and Ochamchire on July 30 – about a week before Russia launched its campaign against Georgia on August 7.²⁹ Later, during the war, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Matthew Bryza, said regarding the railroad troops: “Now we know the truth about why those forces were there. It was to rebuild the railroad to allow ammunition and other military supplies to aid a Russian invasion.”³⁰

The reality of the purposeful Russian preparation for a war against Georgia was later confirmed by retired Army General, former Russian First Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of General Staff (until June 3, 2008), Yuri Baluyevsky, who served³¹ as the Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council during the Russo-Georgian War. In a 2012 Russian documentary film, entitled *Lost Day*, Baluyevsky stated that “a decision to invade Georgia

had been made by Putin before Medvedev was inaugurated President and Commander-in-Chief in May 2008. A detailed plan of military action was arranged and unit commanders were given specific orders in advance.”³²

Some Western intelligence agencies correctly predicted the coming war. According to a senior U.S. intelligence official, ample warning regarding Russian hostile intentions against Georgia had been provided to the Bush administration.³³ In March 2008, the intelligence service of one of the Baltic states was warning that Russia planned a war against Georgia later that year and correctly predicting that the Russian 58th Army and 76th Division would participate.³⁴ Sweden’s signals intelligence service, the National Defense Radio Establishment (FRA), also predicted that Russia would attack Georgia.³⁵ All of this, however, did not translate into the actual awareness of Russia’s intentions among the political leadership of the major Western states and did not influence their diplomatic policy.

Military Escalation in 2008 – Final Leap

In mid-June 2008, explosions and mine incidents took place “close to the Georgian-administrated villages of Kekhvi, Ergneti and Tamarasheni and the de facto South Ossetian militia post in Kokhati” with exchanges of fire “between the Georgian-administered villages of Sveri and Prisi and the South Ossetian-administered villages of Andzisi and Zemo Prisi respectively,” as well as “in the southern environs of Tskhinvali and nearby Georgian villages.”³⁶

On July 3, an explosion targeted the head of the administration of the Georgian-controlled part of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Dmitry Sanakoyev, injuring several Georgian police officers, while another explosion killed a leader of the Tskhinvali militia. These incidents were followed by exchanges of fire during the night of July 3-4.³⁷

Four Russian military jets violated Georgian air space on July 8. Unlike the previous occasions of Georgian air space violations by the Russian aircraft, this time the Russian Foreign Ministry officially acknowledged the violation.³⁸ This incident occurred on the eve of the July 9 visit to Georgia by the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

On July 10, the commander of Russia’s North Caucasus Military District, Colonel-General Sergei Makarov, “announced that his troops were exercising for possible intervention in Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia, in the event that hostilities break out there.”³⁹

Russia launched large-scale Kavkaz-2008 military exercise in close proximity to the Georgian border on July 15. During the exercise, a leaflet, entitled *Warrior, Know Your Probable Enemy*, was distributed among the Russian troops. The leaflet contained information about the Georgian armed forces.⁴⁰ The exercise ended on August 2 – five days before the Russian invasion into Georgia was launched.

According to an expert on Russian military affairs at Kansas State University, Dale Herspring, “this exercise was exactly what they [Russians] executed in Georgia just a few weeks later” and “a complete dress rehearsal.”⁴¹ Colonel Andrei Krasov from the Russian 76th Air Assault Division said in a later interview that during the exercise, the troops of the 76th Division “carefully studied all roads leading to the Roki Tunnel” on the Georgian border⁴² – the same tunnel that became the main route for the Russian invasion during the war, including for the 76th Division that featured prominently in the Russian offensive.

After the exercise, some Russian units “seem to have remained and deployed in a precautionary move near the Georgian border. Therefore, they could quickly move to South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel when ordered to do so.”⁴³ This was later confirmed by Anatoly Khrulyov – commander of the Russian 58th Army during the war, who was wounded in an encounter with Georgian troops on August 9, 2008. In his April 2012 interview, Khrulyov said that after the exercise “some units of the army did not go back to their barracks but stayed in the mountains near the approaches to the Roki Tunnel.”⁴⁴

The Russians also continued strengthening their forces in Abkhazia. In its late July-early August 2008 issue, the Russian magazine, *Ogoniok*, wrote about the influx of heavy armor and fuel trucks from Russia into Abkhazia. Journalist, Pavel Sheremet, reported from the Abkhazian portion of the Russian-Georgian border: “A dozen military trucks are crossing the border without stopping. Presently, they are mainly bringing fuel for military vehicles but a couple of weeks ago those vehicles themselves had entered Abkhazia. Military columns and echelons with tanks and armored personnel carriers were going day and night.”⁴⁵

From July 24 to 28, “several explosions occurred in the southern environs of Tskhinvali and in the Georgian-administered village of Avnevi, close to the post of the Georgian Peacekeeping Force (PKF) battalion.” From July 29 to 31, “exchanges of fire were reported between the Georgian-administered

village of Sveri and the South Ossetian-administered village of Andzisi in the Sarabuki area” as well as “in the area of Khetagurovo between the South Ossetian militia post and the Georgian police post on the Georgian Avnevi-Zemo Nikozi by-pass road.”⁴⁶

“On 1 August, an improvised explosive device that went off on the Georgian Eredvi-Kheiti road by-passing Tskhinvali left five Georgian policemen injured. During the evening and night of 1-2 August, a series of intense and extensive exchanges of fire including sniper fire and mortar shelling occurred in the conflict zone, causing fatalities and casualties,” followed by more exchanges of fire during the nights of August 2-3 and August 3-4.⁴⁷

In the days just prior to the war, groups of armed militants from Russia entered Georgia. Tskhinvali rebel leader, Eduard Kokoity, said on August 4 that 300 “volunteers” from the Russian region of North Ossetia had arrived and that their number was expected to increase to 2,000.⁴⁸ The next day, rebel representative, Dmitry Medoev, confirmed that “volunteers” from Russia were already arriving in Tskhinvali Region.⁴⁹

On August 5, the head of a state-affiliated Russian Cossack organization, Viktor Vodolatsky, who was also a member of the Russian Duma (parliament) from Putin’s United Russia ruling party and former deputy governor of the Rostov Oblast, said his organization was ready to send fighters to Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia to take part in a war against Georgia. Leaders of other Russian Cossack groups also expressed such readiness.⁵⁰ After the war, Vodolatsky stated that the mobilization of “volunteers” was centrally planned and officially performed via drafting stations at the regional and district military commissariats in Russia’s North Caucasus with most of them assigned to the 19th Division of the regular Russian armed forces.⁵¹ On August 6, the Russian newspaper, *Izvestia*, reported “that volunteers were arriving to South Ossetia from as far away as Moscow.”⁵²

From the afternoon of August 6, “fire was exchanged along virtually the whole line of contact between the Georgian and South Ossetian sides, with particular hotspots in the Avnevi-Nuli-Khetagurovo area (west of Tskhinvali) and the Dmenisi-Prisi area (east of Tskhinvali).”⁵³ The Georgian peacekeepers’ post on the Sarabuki heights came under fire, too, with three Georgian peacekeepers being injured.⁵⁴

According to reports in the Russian media, a large number of Russian troops were moving southwards towards the Roki Tunnel on the Georgian

border on August 6, the road being full with Russian military columns of trucks and armored vehicles.⁵⁵

Part II. Start of the Russo-Georgian War on August 7

The military events of August 7 can be divided into two categories. One was the further escalation of the exchanges of fire in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia that had been taking place during the previous days. The other was the launch of the invasion of Georgia by Russian troops and the start of the Georgian operation to counter this invasion.

The fire in Tskhinvali Region, including the use of artillery, continued in the morning and afternoon of August 7. At 14:00, the Georgian peacekeeping checkpoint in the village of Avnevi came under heavy artillery fire which killed two Georgian peacekeepers and wounded five others.⁵⁶ In the evening, artillery fire intensified with most of the Georgian positions near Tskhinvali coming under bombardment.⁵⁷

The crucial development on August 7 was the confirmed launch of the invasion of Georgia by the regular and non-peacekeeping Russian military forces. Georgian intelligence intercepts, post-war reports in the Russian media that slipped past the filter of the Kremlin's official position (which maintains that Russia launched its attack only on August 8), an official Russian criminal investigation publicized by the Mother's Right Foundation (a Russian human rights organization working to protect the rights of families of deceased military servicemen) and the Russian-backed rebel "president" of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh – all confirm the start of the Russian invasion of Georgia on August 7.

Intelligence Intercepts

The intercepted phone calls by South Ossetian rebel "border guards" at the Roki Tunnel on the Russian-Georgian border were made at 03:41 and 03:52 on August 7. In these conversations, a "border guard" at the Roki Tunnel named Gassiev informed his supervisor about Russian military vehicles, including armored ones, which had arrived and "crowded" the tunnel. In the second conversation, Gassiev told the supervisor that the Russian military column had already passed through the tunnel.⁵⁸

Gassiev also mentioned that the Russian column that came in through the Roki Tunnel was commanded by a Russian colonel named Kazachenko.⁵⁹ Colonel Andrei Kazachenko commanded the 693rd Mechanized Regiment of

the 19th Division during the war, taking active part in the Russian offensive and combat against Georgian troops.⁶⁰

Vano Merabishvili, the Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs during the war, “said he was told of the intercepts by Georgian intelligence within hours of their being recorded. The information, he said, was relayed to [President of Georgia] Mr. Saakashvili, who saw them as a sign of a Russian invasion.”⁶¹

Reports in the Russian Media

In one of the media reports, “on Sept. 3 [2008], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the official newspaper of the Russian Defense Ministry, published an article in which a captain in the 135th Regiment, Denis Sidristy, said his unit had been ordered to cease a training exercise and move to Tskhinvali on Aug. 7.”⁶² Sidristy also said that at the time when his unit received the order to move towards Tskhinvali, it was staying in a camp in Nizhny Zaramag⁶³ – a location very close to the Georgian border and the Roki Tunnel.

On August 10, 2008, a Russian soldier from the Perm region serving in the 19th Division of the 58th Army called his mother, telling her: “Mom, I have just come from Tskhinvali. I have very little time. Listen, we are there since August 7. All our 58th Army. I guess you are watching what is going on there on TV? Today, we have come from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz for weapons. Now we are going back.” The soldier was a new recruit. His parents passed the information to the parents of other draftees from the Perm region who were alarmed and said that their sons’ mobile phones went silent on August 7.⁶⁴

In August 2008, the commissioner for human rights in the Perm region, Tatyana Margolina, received letters from three mothers of fresh military draftees who were concerned that their sons could have been sent to the warzone in South Ossetia. One of these letters reads: “In May, my son was sent from the recruitment station to serve in the city of Vladikavkaz. In June, he took an oath and the ‘young fighter’ training course took one month. On August 9, he said on the telephone that they had been sent with a column to South Ossetia in the evening of August 7.”⁶⁵

In late August 2008, a local newspaper in the Russian city of Saransk – the capital of the Mordovia region – wrote about Yunir Bikkinyayev, a native of Saransk, serving as a private in the 58th Army. As the newspaper reported after interviewing his family, “on August 7 the parents got worried – Yunir stopped answering phone calls. As he later admitted, he just did not want

to scare his family. But the worst thoughts of his parents were confirmed – the 135th Regiment, where our countryman was serving, had been urgently sent to South Ossetia.”⁶⁶

In May 2009, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* – official newspaper of the Government of Russia – reported the unveiling of a bronze bust of Major Denis Vetchinov who died fighting Georgian troops in August 2008. The report says: “The monument of the Hero of Russia, Major Denis Vetchinov, has been unveiled at the base of the 19th Mechanized Division [in Vladikavkaz]. From here, in the early morning of August 7 of last year, the 32-year old major went on his tour of duty to Tskhinvali.”⁶⁷

Another media report points at the Russian troops illegally entering Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia even before August 7. A lieutenant from the city of Kazan, Sasha (Alexander) Popov, graduated from a tank academy in 2007 and was then sent to serve in Vladikavkaz – home of the 19th Division. He fought in the war against Georgia and was wounded. On August 12, his mother told journalists: “I had a call with him in the afternoon on Monday [August 11]. He has already had an operation and is being transferred to Budyonnovsk. They were supposed to leave South Ossetia back on Tuesday-Wednesday [August 5-6] – they had had exercises there. But it seems they stayed. He was telling me about a week before the war started: ‘I see how they are shooting at Tskhinvali.’ They were having exercises somewhere in the mountains and my son said that Tskhinvali could be seen perfectly from there.” On August 9, Popov called his mother telling her he was “wounded but alive” and that his unit had been “the first to enter Tskhinvali.”⁶⁸

In his 2010 book, prominent researcher of the Russo-Georgian War and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs during the second Clinton administration, Ronald D. Asmus, stated that “subsequent sources and press reports during and after the war by journalists in South Ossetia also suggest that elements of the 135th and 693rd Regiments of the Fifty-eighth Army and the Twenty-second Special Forces Brigade as well as several tank units had already moved into South Ossetia between August 2 and the evening of August 7.”⁶⁹

Russian Criminal Investigation

Besides the reports in the media, another source that has provided confirmation of the presence of the Russian invasion forces in Georgia on August 7 is an official Russian criminal investigation, publicized by

the Mother's Right Foundation – a non-governmental human rights organization in Russia.

On March 12, 2014, the Mother's Right Foundation issued a press release about the case of Vladimir Selipetov, a Russian soldier from the 3rd Mechanized Battalion of the 693rd Mechanized Regiment. Commander of this same regiment, Colonel Kazachenko, is mentioned as the leader of the incoming Russian column by the South Ossetian "border guard" in the early morning of August 7 phone call that was intercepted by the Georgian intelligence and is referred to above. Selipetov died on August 7, on the Georgian side of the border near the Roki Tunnel. According to the official version, he committed suicide. His parents, however, did not buy it and engaged in a long legal battle to find out the truth about the fate of their son. In July 2009, they appealed to the Mother's Right Foundation for assistance and received its support.

The Foundation's March 12, 2014 press release reads: "Vladimir Selipetov (born 1986) was drafted into the army on June 20, 2007, serving in the military unit 66431 [the unit number of the 693rd Mechanized Regiment] in the republic of North Ossetia-Alania [a region of the Russian Federation]. **According to the materials of the criminal investigation, the death of Vladimir Selipetov occurred at about 04:00 on August 7, 2008 on the territory of the Java District of the republic of South Ossetia, '155 meters to the south-east from the entrance of the southern portal' of the Roki Tunnel.** He died of 'a single penetrating bullet wound to the head,' the shot being made from an AKS-74 [assault rifle]."⁷⁰

That same day, "on August 7, the military investigative division for the Vladikavkaz garrison at the Russian Federation prosecutor's office launched a criminal investigation regarding the evidence of a crime under Article 110 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation."⁷¹

One of the issues for Selipetov's parents was the fact that "families of the soldiers killed during the war in South Ossetia received compensation payments from the Russian state" but Selipetov's family did not because "officially their son died under unclear circumstances one day before the start of the military operation in South Ossetia."⁷² The failure of the Russian government to pay compensation to Selipetov's parents, unlike families of other soldiers who died during the Russo-Georgian War, resulted from Moscow's official position that it started its military offensive against Georgia only on August 8 instead of the actual date of August 7.

The Mother's Right Foundation lamented that from the last official refusal to re-open Selipetov's case "it follows that Selipetov and the soldiers of his platoon found themselves in the territory of another state with combat weapons and wearing body armor and began digging trenches there, almost by accident." The Foundation's press release summarized that "the story of the death of Vladimir Selipetov clearly illustrates the situation of the death of a draftee on the territory of another state one day before the official start of a military operation there (with all the consequences for the family of the deceased)."⁷³

Confession of Sergei Bagapsh

Further evidence about the start of the Russian invasion of Georgia was provided by the Russian-backed "president" of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, when on August 7, 2008 he said on camera that Russian troops had entered Georgia. A Russian TV channel broadcasted Bagapsh's statement that same day: "I have spoken to the president of South Ossetia. It [the situation] has more or less stabilized now. A battalion from the North Caucasus District⁷⁴ has entered the area."⁷⁵

Launch of the Cyber War

On August 7, in parallel with the Russian troops crossing the Georgian border, a cyber attack originating from Russia was launched against Georgia when "several Georgian servers and the Internet traffic were seized and placed under external control."⁷⁶ Previously, a single cyber attack had been launched on July 20, shutting down President Saakashvili's website for 24 hours.⁷⁷

The Russian action in the cyber domain that began on August 7 continued aggressively during the following days of the war and historically became the first extensive and coordinated cyber offensive against a nation going in parallel with a conventional military offensive against the same nation. The targets of the cyber attack were Georgian government and media websites as well as financial, business and other institutions.⁷⁸

"The primary objective of the cyber campaign was to support the Russian invasion of Georgia, and the cyber attacks fit neatly into the invasion plan." This Russian effort did bring results: "The cyber attacks significantly impeded the ability of the Georgian government to deal with the Russian invasion by interfering with communications between the government and the public, stopping many payments and financial transactions, and

causing confusion about what was happening.” The attacks “disrupted the Georgian government’s efforts to disseminate information about the invasion and deprived the government of many information sources. They made it difficult to keep the outside world informed about what was happening, reducing the chances of outside help.”⁷⁹

Start of the Georgian Operation

During the day on August 7, Mikheil Saakashvili kept receiving intelligence reports about the Russian troops gathering in the Java District inside Georgia as well as on the northern side of the Roki Tunnel.⁸⁰

At 13:00 on August 7, Saakashvili “convened a meeting of the Georgian National Security Council (NSC) to discuss the rapidly deteriorating situation.” The Minister of Internal Affairs, Vano Merabishvili, briefed the participants of the meeting on the intelligence intercepts pointing at “Russian forces taking control of and then moving forces through the Roki Tunnel.” The Georgians did not know for sure how many Russian troops had entered Georgia but their estimate at that point was a battalion.⁸¹

Between 23:00 and 23:30 on August 7 (various researchers differ on the exact time), Saakashvili received new intelligence that the Russians were bringing more troops through the Roki Tunnel while the Russian troops that had already invaded Georgia earlier were moving southward on Georgian territory.

According to Svante Cornell, Johanna Popjanevski and Niklas Nilsson, “at approximately 11 PM [August 7] Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili receives information that a convoy of over 100 Russian military vehicles is passing through the Roki Tunnel.”⁸² Ronald Asmus provides a bit more detail about the information Saakashvili received at that point: “Not only were there reports of renewed shelling against a number of Georgian villages and positions, but Tbilisi also had intelligence reports from earlier in the day that additional Russian forces had moved into the Roki Tunnel and had orders to cross over that evening. And Georgian reconnaissance scouts were reporting a sighting of what they believed was a Russian army column moving from Java south toward Tskhinvali.”⁸³

The U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State at the time, Matthew Bryza, later stated that “during the height of all of these developments, when I was on the phone with senior Georgian officials, they sure sounded completely convinced that Russian armored vehicles had entered the Roki Tunnel, and exited the Roki Tunnel” on August 7.⁸⁴

Shortly before the start of the Georgian military operation, Bryza spoke with Eka Tkeshelashvili, the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs. According to Bryza, “she sounded completely convinced, on a human level, of the Russian presence”⁸⁵ and told him that the Russians were “entering into South Ossetia with tanks and more than 1,000 men.”⁸⁶

Bryza, “under instructions,” urged the Georgians “not to engage these Russians directly.”⁸⁷ However, when late on August 7 the Georgian leadership kept receiving reports about the Russian troops and armored vehicles in Georgia, they decided they had to act. The Georgian government informed Bryza that it had “no other choice but to advance towards the [Roki] tunnel in an attempt to push the Russian troops back.”⁸⁸

“The final straw was a Georgian reconnaissance unit’s visual confirmation of a military column moving from Java toward Tskhinvali. Based on the numbers and type of equipment in the column – tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery – the Georgians concluded that these forces were neither South Ossetian nor North Caucasian ‘volunteers.’ It was the Russian army. It confirmed Saakashvili’s suspicion that his country was being invaded by Moscow and triggered his late-night decision to fight back.”⁸⁹

At 23:35 on August 7, Saakashvili “phoned Georgian Chief of Staff, Zaza Gogava, and gave two orders: stop the Russian columns heading toward Tskhinvali and coming through the Roki Tunnel, and suppress the Ossetian shelling of Georgian positions and villages. After hanging up, he paused, then picked up the phone again and added a third order: ‘Minimize civilian casualties.’”⁹⁰

Upon receiving the president’s orders, the Georgian armed forces launched their military operation. They were subsequently defeated by the Russian forces that kept pouring into Georgia through the Roki Tunnel as well as Abkhazia throughout the war (August 7-August 12) and were heavily supported by the Russian air force which bombed numerous locations in Georgia and the Russian navy that blockaded Georgia from the sea.

Part III. Start of Combat between Russian Troops with the Status of Peacekeepers and Georgian Forces

Besides Moscow’s false claim that its troops went into Georgia on August 8 instead of August 7, another untruth employed as a political weapon by the Kremlin is the narrative that the Georgians attacked Russian troops

in Tskhinvali Region that had the status of peacekeepers. In fact, these Russian troops were the first to open hostilities against the Georgian forces that were advancing in the Tskhinvali area in the morning of August 8, thus violating their mandate as peacekeepers and making themselves “legitimate military targets under international law.”⁹¹

Russian actions regarding peacekeepers in Tskhinvali included:

- Placement of the Russian Special Forces troops at the peacekeepers’ base prior to the war;
- False claim by Russian officials that Russian peacekeepers had been killed, made several hours before the peacekeepers’ first combat with the Georgian troops and the resulting deaths actually happened;
- Support in targeting the Georgians with artillery given to South Ossetian rebels from the peacekeepers’ base in the south of Tskhinvali;
- Order from the superiors given to the Russian peacekeepers located at this same base in the south of Tskhinvali to block the movement of the Georgian troops, including with the use of lethal force;
- Fire opened by Russian troops from the peacekeepers’ base in the south of Tskhinvali against the Georgian forces.

Special Forces Troops at the Peacekeepers’ Base

The fact of the Russian Special Forces’ presence with the peacekeepers in Tskhinvali was confirmed by the President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, on August 8, 2011. While awarding a military decoration to the 10th Special Forces Brigade, Medvedev said: “Today, it is three years since the attack of the Georgian army against South Ossetia. Hundreds of people were killed then and thousands were in mortal danger. The path of the aggressor was blocked by Russian peacekeepers, among whom were also your comrades. During those complicated dramatic days, they did their duty with honor, some of them at the cost of their lives.”⁹² In his speech, Medvedev gave credit to the troops of the 10th SF Brigade for “preparing and carrying out the most complex military operations in the North Caucasus and in South Ossetia.”⁹³

Less illustrious sources also point at the deployment of the Russian Special Forces with the peacekeepers that started before the war. Scout sniper from the 10th SF Brigade, Alexei Batuyev, who was wounded fighting Georgian troops on August 8, had been attached to the peacekeepers in

Tskhinvali “three months” before the war.⁹⁴ The official short history of the 10th SF Brigade, seen by the participants of press tours in this unit, says that “a task group” from this brigade “carried out special tasks” in Tskhinvali “from April 30, 2008 to August 28, 2008.”⁹⁵ Scout sapper, Raushan Abdullin, died on August 8 while fighting Georgian troops “within the ranks of a Special Forces detachment of the 10th Separate Special Forces Brigade.” In September 2009, he was posthumously decorated as a Hero of the Russian Federation by presidential decree. Abdullin had been attached to the Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia since 2007⁹⁶ although another source says that his unit was sent to Tskhinvali in April 2008.⁹⁷

As Andrei Illarionov notes,⁹⁸ despite the fact that the Special Forces troops were attached to the peacekeepers, they did not appear to be under the command of either peacekeepers or even the 58th Army to which the peacekeepers belonged. Commander of the Russian peacekeepers’ base in the south of Tskhinvali, Lieutenant Colonel Konstantin Timerman, did not mention the Special Forces when speaking of the units he had under his command at the moment when combat with the Georgian forces started.⁹⁹ Commander of the 58th Army, General Anatoly Khrulyev, was asked in an interview whether he had been in contact with the 10th SF Brigade during the war. Khrulyev answered that “there was cooperation, but they were acting in accordance with their own tasks, given by the superior military commander.”¹⁰⁰

While there is relatively much information about troops from the 10th SF Brigade being attached to the peacekeepers in Tskhinvali before the war, they were not the only Special Forces fighters in this role. Troops of the 22nd SF Brigade had also been sent to the peacekeepers’ base in Tskhinvali and fought against the Georgian forces on August 8.¹⁰¹

Premature Claim of an Attack on Russian Peacekeepers

Moscow’s employment of the claim of a Georgian attack against the Russian peacekeepers as a political weapon had begun even before any combat between these peacekeepers and the Georgians took place. Sources that touch upon these events are in consensus that this combat first started around 06:00 on August 8. The Russian Ministry of Defense spokesperson “told Western reporters that the first Russian peacekeepers were killed after 06:00 as Georgian forces moved into southern Tskhinvali.”¹⁰² And yet, Moscow’s first claim of the attack on the peacekeepers and of their deaths

was made more than three hours before it possibly could have happened: at 02:37, the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin, telephoned his Georgian colleague, Grigol Vashadze, telling him “that Russian armed forces were starting military operation in Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia citing casualties among Russian peacekeepers as a reason for this decision.”¹⁰³

Confrontation

When Georgian troops did approach the southern side of Tskhinvali around 06:00 on August 8, they were targeted by artillery fire that was directed from the Russian peacekeepers’ base. Ossetian rebel fighter, Oleg Galavanov, was directing artillery fire against the Georgians from the roof of one of this base’s buildings. He was subsequently mortally wounded in action and, later, nominated posthumously for the Hero of the Russian Federation decoration.¹⁰⁴ Russian soldier from the 10th Special Forces Brigade, Maxim Petrov, was wounded while being on the same roof, side by side with Galavanov.¹⁰⁵

The direction of artillery fire that targeted Georgians conducted from the base of the Russian peacekeepers clearly violated their mandate and constituted hostile action but it was not the gravest violation that they committed. In an even worse development, the peacekeepers in Tskhinvali were ordered by their superiors to block the Georgian troops from entering Tskhinvali and use lethal force in the process.

In his October 2008 interview with *Izvestia*, Lieutenant Colonel Konstantin Timerman – commander of the Russian peacekeepers at the base in the south of Tskhinvali – said regarding the events of August 8: “We were given the task: not to allow the Georgian troops to move towards the capital [Tskhinvali].”¹⁰⁶ Shortly after the war, the Deputy Chief of Timerman’s staff, Captain Yuri Rozhentsev, made the same kind of statement for the Russian Defense Ministry official newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda*: “We were given the task not to allow a breakthrough of the adversary [Georgians] into Tskhinvali.”¹⁰⁷

In its August 22, 2008 article, *Krasnaya Zvezda* reported that Timerman “gave one task to everyone [troops under his command] – not to allow the adversary into Tskhinvali. He said then: ‘We shall not let the enemy pass!’ and ‘Stand to the end!’ And the peacekeeper soldiers did everything possible and impossible to stop the aggressor.”¹⁰⁸

Another *Krasnaya Zvezda* article, based on an interview with Timerman and published on August 19, 2008, says: “There was just one tactical objective: from their position, not to allow the adversary towards Tskhinvali. The most powerful weapons the peacekeepers had – cannons of the infantry fighting vehicles (73 mm Grom), anti-tank guided missiles and grenade launchers – began to work at once.”¹⁰⁹

In their account of the events of August 7 and 8, Russian military medics who had been sent to Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia on July 14, 2008 and served in Tskhinvali when the war started – Alexander Konovalov and Dmitry Zubok – report the orders that were received by the Russian peacekeepers to use lethal force against the Georgian troops.

According to Konovalov, “around lunch on August 7 we received a call from the battalion commander [Timerman], telling us ‘the situation was escalating.’ We were asked to arrive at the territory of the peacekeeping battalion.” Konovalov adds that the medics arrived at the peacekeepers’ base around 15:00-16:00. Zubok reports that in the evening of August 7, the medics, already at the peacekeepers’ base, were told by an officer (chief of food supply) who was wearing a helmet and body armor that “the order has been given to shoot to kill.” Konovalov further reports: “Around 04:00 [August 8], when we were at the medical post, the alarm was sounded and by the order of the battalion commander we were given body armor, assault rifles, helmets and were equipped. Around that time we had a conversation with the battalion commander who let us understand that the order ‘in case of something, shoot to kill’ had already been given.”¹¹⁰

When the Georgian troops “moved into southern Tskhinvali around 06:00 on the morning of August 8, they encountered heavy fire from the southern Russian peacekeeping headquarters.”¹¹¹ “Once fired upon, the Georgians returned fire.”¹¹² The resulting intense exchange of fire between the Russian and Georgian troops “slowed the Georgian offensive” in Tskhinvali.¹¹³

After this encounter with the peacekeepers’ base on the morning of August 8, the Georgian troops still “had orders not to fire upon Russian peacekeepers unless they were fired on first.” This fact had tragic consequences in at least one instance when during the fighting within Tskhinvali, the Georgian 41st Infantry Battalion “encountered a group of armored infantry carriers of the Russian peacekeeping forces, conspicuous by the large blue circle painted on its side with the yellow Cyrillic letters

MC... The Georgian battalion commander of the Forty-first Battalion, Major Shalva Dolidze, gave the order not to fire and to let the Russian peacekeeping forces pass. It was the last order he gave: the Russians approached the Georgian forces and suddenly opened fire, killing Dolidze and a number of his staff officers.”¹¹⁴

Struggling with the Alt-history of the Russo-Georgian War

The Western world truly awoke to the reality of the Kremlin’s perception-shaping methods of information warfare only quite recently after the start of Russian attacks on the political systems of Western nations. Somewhat earlier, in 2014, events in Ukraine helped raise awareness of how sustained disinformation can be used to justify military aggression and occupation.

The arsenal of these methods was being employed by Russia long before Western societies became widely aware of it. It represents the latest stage in the evolution of practices used in the Soviet period and has never been actually set aside by Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After Putin’s rise to power, however, its application became better-resourced and generally bolder.

Georgia was heavily struck with this weapon during and after the war of 2008. Russia’s formidable propaganda and diplomatic resources were directed to achieve the victim-blaming of Georgia for the military invasion conducted by Moscow and for the Russian-Georgian war that took place exclusively on the territory of Georgia.

Russia has not been fully successful in this endeavor but it did manage to muddy the waters considerably. In many quarters, the established narrative was narrowed down to Georgia starting a military offensive in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia after Russian provocations with Russia then responding to this Georgian action with a disproportionately large-scale and aggressive military operation. This narrative does not reflect the actual facts that occurred in August 2008. And yet, it has been used to assign to Georgia some part of the blame for the war.

One of the most blatant instances of this phenomenon was a report published in 2009 by the “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia”, headed by a Swiss diplomat, Heidi Tagliavini. Despite all the evidence pointing at the presence of the regular non-peacekeeping Russian troops on the Georgian side of the Russia-Georgia

border by August 7, the report simply declared that such presence could not be verified and that, therefore, Georgia did not have a right to exercise self-defense at that point.

Such neglect of evidence is unsustainable. On the one hand, it does injustice to history. On the other, it empowers Russia's propaganda and diplomatic warfare that it has been continuously waging against Georgia.

The numerous facts to which I refer in this paper, as well as many others that I have not included because of this work's size restrictions, spell out the following:

- After Russia's sustained military and diplomatic preparation for the war, the regular Russian troops that were not part of the peacekeepers had invaded Georgian territory by August 7. While some sources point to the presence of these Russian forces in Georgia even earlier during the few preceding days, the evidence of such presence specifically on August 7 is overwhelming.
- This Russian invasion on August 7 constituted an act of aggression against Georgia as defined by Article 3(a) of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314, Definition of Aggression, which clearly states that the invasion by the armed forces of a state of the territory of another state is an act of aggression.¹¹⁵
- Georgia launched its military operation only from 23:35 on August 7, long after the start of the Russian invasion and after Tbilisi repeatedly received intelligence reports about the movements of invading Russian troops within Georgian territory. Georgia was, therefore, exercising its right of self-defense under international law.
- The military encounter in the south of Tskhinvali in the morning of August 8 between Georgian troops and the Russian troops that had the status of peacekeepers (as well as the Russian Special Forces troops that had been attached to the peacekeepers prior to the war) happened after the peacekeepers were ordered to block the Georgian advance into Tskhinvali which was taking place as a part of the Georgian operation that started after 23:35, August 7. The Russian troops at the peacekeepers' base were authorized to shoot to kill at the Georgians, which they proceeded to do.

A lot has changed since August 2008 and the immediate post-war period. New evidence has emerged, such as the internal Russian criminal

investigation of a soldier's death in Georgia on August 7 referred to above, or Putin's admission in 2012 that the Russian General Staff had prepared the plan for a potential war with Georgia in advance and that the Russian military instructors had been training the Ossetian militias prior to the war of 2008. Just as important is the better general understanding in the West of the Kremlin's geopolitical goals and the methods it employs to accomplish them. Ten years after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Georgians deserve a fresher look at it, free from the confusion caused by disinformation and the misrepresentation of facts.

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