



## The Georgia-Russia War in South Ossetia: The Russian View

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April 9, 2010

The Georgia war on South Ossetia August 8, 2008 has become a key marker in the history of the "post-Cold War" world and the facts and mythologies around it are defining NATO and Russian agendas today and will define them into the future. The Georgian attack on Tskhinval came as a major shock to the Russian nation and in the view of many, 8/8 was the Russian 9/11.

For those seeking the Russian perspective, a new publication by the Moscow-based Center of Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), titled *The Tanks of August*, is a must read.<sup>1</sup> The well-informed director of CAST, Ruslan Pukhov also publishes "Moscow Defense Brief" which carried one of the earliest published Russian reviews of the war.<sup>2</sup>

*The Tanks of August* consists of six essays by Mikhail Barabanov, Anton Lavrov and Viacheslav Tseluiko offering both factual and analytical perspectives which most Western readers rarely encounter. Without these one can not understand the significance of that five-day war. Additionally these essays are essential to begin to develop competent future policies for U.S. and NATO relations with Russia and other states in the region.

Introduced by Mikhail Barabanov's preface that positions the conflict in a wider context, the chapters provide important insights into key facets of the war, as well as its prelude and aftermath.

The detailed description of the Georgian military forces reform by Viatcheslav Tseluiko is supported by some 80 footnotes. On the positive side, the expert points out the Georgian investment in its military's "human capital" that included improving servicemen's living standards. Georgia was the first on post-Soviet space to adopt western standards and equipment for its fundamental military reform that begun during the Shevardnadze presidency. In 2007-2008 Georgia's military budget represented a staggering 8 percent of GDP. Nevertheless, the manner in which the war was fought revealed that underneath the new Western uniforms serious problems remained: a lack of discipline and self-organization, low morale, corruption and nepotism, low education, and the absence of a national military tradition.

The second essay by Anton Lavrov provides a very detailed itemization of the events of the five-day war, many of which are not evident in Western chronologies. He assembles carefully verified materials, prepared from a combination of Russian and Georgian sources, which offer a perspective different from most of the Russian materials available elsewhere. Included is a thorough review of the pre-conflict situation which dates a marked escalation by August 1st, with high intensity military activity going on to the 7th of August, finally erupting in all-out war on August 8th. This careful exposition of facts convincingly dismantles the official Saakashvili statements that the Georgian actions were taken in response to a Russian attack.

The third piece on the future possibility of a Georgia-Russian conflict by Viatcheslav Tseluiko analyzes the lessons drawn by the Georgian leadership from the military debacle and the current rearming of Georgia. As a result of the war, Saakashvili reoriented the military for future conflict with Russia instead of domestic/foreign counterinsurgency operations which were announced as the focus of U.S. training programs. Having pursued a program of active rearmament—the details of which are carefully laid out—the Georgian military not only recovered its arms, equipment and manpower, but substantially increased it compared with August 2008.

The next essay, on Russian losses, is quite critical of the preparedness and effectiveness of the Russian armed forces. This piece demonstrates that the main cause of Russian aviation losses was friendly fire—a conclusion that was published early in CAST's *Moscow Defense Brief* and provoked a vivid denial from the Ministry of Defense. Besides, the author poses serious questions about the coordination and interaction of different branches of the Russian armed forces.

The following piece, on Georgian losses, debunks the widespread belief about high Georgian casualties: losses were moderate because the Georgian soldiers were retreating very fast, only after a few encounters with the Russian troops.

An important analysis of the current and possible future Russian-Georgian conflicts emphasizes that the August war has not solved the contradictions between Russia and Georgia. These contradictions do not preclude a repetition/re-ignition of a military conflict in the future. Saakashvili's continuing course maintains the underlying conflict with Russia latent and carries a serious potential of instability.

The final essay describes the Russian military bases and infrastructure in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the aftermath of the war—the number of troops remains the same in Abkhazia—3,000 men, and increased in South Ossetia from 1,000 to 3,000 men. Since, exchanges of fire along the borders have decreased sharply and no civilian perished in the year since August 2008. Saakashvili now avoids talking publicly about bringing the independent republics back into Georgia by force but has not renounced to doing it.

The book is completed with an itemization of the military contributions to Georgia's armed capacity in 2000-2008 from countries including the United States, Ukraine, Israel, Turkey, Greece, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Uzbekistan. Originally, CAST was planning to publish an accompanying essay on the arms supplies, but the compiled information is so voluminous and multifaceted, that the Center decided to make a separate publication in the near future.

*The Tanks of August* covers mostly the military matters. Not discussed is the U.S.-engineered "Rose Revolution" which brought Saakashvili and his pro-NATO advisors to power as well as the "Orange Revolution" which brought their Ukrainian counterparts to power in time to provide essential logistical support to the Georgians. Key advisors in the Georgia war leadership included National Security Council director Alexander Lomia and Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria, both of whom had worked closely with U.S. organizations in coordinating the Rose Revolution.

For readers interested in additional materials on the war itself, the European Union's *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia* is essential reading and in particular Volume III of the report which is the unedited official Russian statement on the war.<sup>3</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Available in Russian in .pdf format on their [web site](#). An English translation may be available in the future.

<sup>2</sup> Issue #3 2008 (In English), [The Empire Strikes Back](#).

<sup>3</sup> All three volumes of the Commission's Report are available [here](#). Der Spiegel's extensive coverage of the Report is available [here](#).

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