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The Russian-Georgian War of 2008: Causes and Implications

Ants Laaneots

ESTONIAN NATIONAL DEFENCE COLLEGE

THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN WAR OF 2008: CAUSES AND IMPLICATION

ANTS LAANEOTS



Translated into English by Karl Salum

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FOREWORD

Almost eight years have passed since the first major post-Cold War earthquake in terms of European security order, the August war in Georgia, took place. It was a significant wake-up call for the whole post-Soviet area as well as the West. Unfortunately, time has shown that the West, at least, did not take it seriously enough both in political and military terms. The need for cooperation with Russia prevailed over many grand principles that the West publicly advocated, such as the right of a state to choose its security solutions. Today, Russia continues the illegal annexation of South Ossetia and other parts of Georgian territory, promoting them as “independent states”.

The ideological foundation of Russia’s intents and activities became clear in 2009 when a book ordered by the Kremlin titled “Russia’s new doctrine. Time to spread our wings” was published. The book prescribed two ambitious strategic goals for the Russian state:

1. Near term goal: restore control over the post-Soviet space and establish a new Union.
2. End goal: to become a global administrator and dethrone the United States.

Regarding the end goal, the book states: “While the United States is merely imitating and actually tarnishing the role of a global administrator, Russia should have a natural right for this mission. Now Russia has to confirm this role by actually implementing it.” We cannot rule out the possibility of Russia conducting military offensives in addition to hybrid tools and methods.

Because of the West’s haphazard reaction, Russia was emboldened enough to undertake a second and even larger challenge to the European security order with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion in Eastern Ukraine. In retrospect, the overall strategy and many of the tactics employed by Russia were first rehearsed in Georgia five or six years earlier. The reforms undertaken by the Russian military, as well as the national defense structures, in order to address the major shortcomings experienced during the Georgian war were noted by the West but not taken into consideration. Even after the war, Russia continued to purchase military equipment and some armament from Western companies, all of which contributed to their military reform. While the reform was not implemented completely as planned, due to financial as well as structural constraints, the successes achieved became obvious even before the annexation of Crimea. Year by year, the Russian military conducted increasingly larger-scale exercises which included joint

and interagency components and involved more modern armament and technology. The scope of the exercises ranged from counterinsurgency to conventional combat up to the level of theater nuclear war – operations that NATO had not conducted during exercises since the end of the Cold War.

Today Russia is conducting a feverish rearmament program with strategic as well as tactical nuclear forces as the top priority, in addition to increasing the offensive capabilities of land forces and special forces. Russian leadership's aggressive stance and an increased threat posture towards its neighbors around the Baltic Sea is further confirmed by the sharply increasing number of forces in the Western Military District. In 2015, the 1st Guard Tank Army was re-established in the Western Military District by combining the elite tank formations of the Russian Army. It has to be noted that a tank army is clearly an offensive capability, not a defensive one. The establishment of such a formation refers to Putin's aggressive intentions towards Russia's western neighbors.

Perhaps the most apparent success has been the integration of the special forces of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior Affairs, which were combined into a single Special Operations Command. Posing as unmarked soldiers in Russian military uniforms and equipment, it was these troops who facilitated the annexation of Crimea. Their mission continued in Eastern Ukraine in cooperation with the FSB, organizing a local level insurgency among the Russian-minded population, which has now grown to a regional level and includes thousands of Russian government troops and intelligence personnel. For political reasons, Russia cannot afford to show overt military support for the insurgents of Eastern Ukraine, as they could in South Ossetia. However, Russian strategy in both cases has been remarkably similar. This leaves us with two acute questions: which region in Russia's neighborhood could be the next target and what measures should the West undertake to prevent such scenarios?

The ongoing economic crisis in Russia is driving Putin's aggressiveness and the raise of the war hysteria. This will draw the Russian people's attention away from domestic issues to the so-called "external enemies". The current situation demands extensive and extraordinary measures from Western-oriented countries bordering Russia as well as from NATO to assure their security and defense.

Ants Laaneots

General (retired)

Part I: Russian Geopolitical Interests in Southern Caucasus

In the summer of 2013, five years had passed¹ since the occurrence of the last large-scale armed conflict in the post-Soviet space when the Russian Federation, as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, attacked the Republic of Georgia. This conflict is considered to be a continuation of the Russian military operations in the Caucasus region that began in December of 1994 with the outbreak of the war in Chechnya. For Russia, the purpose of these operations was to quell independence movements and restore its supremacy in this strategically important region.

The Southern Caucasus has historically been a transit corridor for goods and people that connects Asia and Europe. For centuries, the region has also been a hotspot for the clashing geopolitical interests of three major regional powers: Russia, Turkey and Persia (modern Iran). People living in what is presently the territory of Georgia have witnessed and experienced the oppression of Russian, Turkish and Persian conquerors. As the only two Christian nations in the region Georgia and Armenia suffered especially under Muslim oppression. Many Russian historians claim that the extreme violence of the Persians, who invaded Georgia in 1795, compelled the local Czar Georgi XII to appeal to the Russian Czar Pavel I to allow Georgia to join the Russian Empire. Pavel I signed the decree on December 22nd, 1800². Under the command of General Lazarev, the Russian forces liberated Georgia from the Persians and it became a part of the Russian Empire.

Later, the Southern Caucasus acquired an especial importance for Russia when the rich oil fields of Azerbaijan were discovered. At the end of the 19th century, the oil fields surrounding Baku produced nearly half of the world's oil. Oil produced in Azerbaijan was of great importance to the Soviet Union as it supplied fuel for the Red Army before, during, and after World War II. Since then its importance has diminished as new oil fields were developed in Siberia and Northern Russia. Today, the Southern Caucasus has become an even more important transit corridor for Russia and Western Europe, due to the large number of oil and natural gas deposits that have been discovered

¹ The author's research was conducted in 2013 and the monograph was first published in 2014. *Editor's remark.*

² Шенин, О. 2009. Разгром грузинских захватчиков под Цхинвалом. Москва: ЯУЗА, ЭКСМО, с. 7. [Hereinafter *Шенин 2009*]

in the Caspian Sea and in the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Both Russia and Europe are clearly interested in these resources.

The breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 enabled the three Southern Caucasian Soviet Republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) to declare independence and pursue independent foreign and domestic politics. This, however, did not align with Russian geopolitical interests in the region. Moscow, as the successor of the Soviet Union, rather envisioned restoring the empire so it was especially concerned that the Southern Caucasian states might choose Western integration instead of Eastern, and thus completely disassociate themselves from Russia. As a result Moscow undertook active measures in the region, whereby they successfully utilized the 'divide and conquer' principle and took advantage of historic schisms between states and ethnic groups. Moscow succeeded in rekindling the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and among the Georgian ethnic groups. This enabled them to maintain political control over Southern Caucasian affairs and a military presence in the region.

The ambitions of Vladimir Putin, who succeeded the ailing Boris Yeltsin as the Russian President, went even further. One of his highest priorities was to restore Russia's status as an empire and a world power. Being acutely aware of Europe's heavy dependence on Russian energy sources, Putin used this to his advantage. Natural gas and oil became weapons that Russia used to gradually influence, and even pressure the European Union, as well as NATO states, into adopting policies more favorable to the Kremlin. Russia's new leaders enacted steadfast initiatives to seize control over all of the oil and gas produced in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states, including Azerbaijan and the former Soviet Republics east of the Caspian Sea. The former republics were a key to the Russian strategy of controlling oil and gas transport from Asia to Europe. Armenia, which had won in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Russia's help, was already under Moscow's control with a large Russian military base in Gümri.

Armenia, however, was not as strategically important as the other neighboring states. All of the East-West oil and gas pipelines ran from Azerbaijan to Turkey through Georgia, and completely bypassed Armenia. Thus, Georgia was the bottleneck of the Southern Caucasus transit corridor, and regaining control over it was of utmost importance for Moscow. The problem became especially acute after the Rose Revolution in 2004 when the new Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his government turned their backs on Russia and announced their intent to become a member of NATO.

Moscow was also seeking to expand their access to the Black Sea. At the time Kiev was vigorously demanding that Russia remove its Black Sea Fleet from the naval base in Sevastopl. This posed a significant problem for Russia, as there were no other suitable ports (including Novorossiysk) where they might relocate the entire Fleet. However, there were several good and strategically vital locations on the coast of Abkhazia. The relocation of the Black Sea Fleet to Abkhazia, in the proximity of the Southern Caucasus states, could have become a strong influential factor affecting the politics and security of these states as well as of Turkey, Iran and the whole region in general. The Russians were also interested in Abkhazia as an ideal vacation and tourism location.

South Ossetia, which extends into the central Georgian territory as a small appendage, had no economic significance for Russia. Yet at the same time, South Ossetia was extremely vital in a military strategic sense. The Russian military bases in Abkhazia and Armenia formed a potential blocking position along the East-West transit corridor south of the Caucasus Mountains. These bases could exert influence on the domestic, foreign and economic policies of the regional states. The policies would naturally be favorable to Moscow. The potential closure of the aforementioned corridor would threaten Georgian independence, as well as isolate stubborn Azerbaijan from its ally Turkey. Azerbaijan would then face a difficult choice: whether to maintain good relations with Russia, or remain in isolation, facing hostile Iran. The Kremlin thus started seeking solutions to realize its geostrategic ambitions.

The Russian strategy in South Caucasus after the breakup of the Soviet Union contained the following general goals:

- Avoid the departure of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia from the Russian sphere of influence and prevent them from joining NATO and the EU. In addition, prevent the expansion of these two organizations into the Southern Caucasus, and in the long run check their potential spread to the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. In order to achieve this goal, forces loyal to the Kremlin had to be fostered to allow them to seize power in the Southern Caucasus states.
- Restore control over the transit corridors of the pipelines and other goods to Europe, which were previously independent of Russia. This would have enabled Russia to block the transport of oil and gas from the Caspian basin (Azerbaijan) and Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan) as well as prevent the construction of new pipelines to Western Europe that would have bypassed Russia (see Figure 1). As a result, Russia would be able to monopolize the supply of energy resources to Western Europe, which

- would result in the economic dependence of the EU and NATO members on Russia and, consequently, make them vulnerable to political influence.
- Maintain a military presence in the Southern Caucasus.
 - Increase the economic and political dependence of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian states, as well as China on Russia by keeping the Southern Caucasus under Russian control.
 - Seize the maximum share of the oil and gas fields in the Caspian Basin.
 - The primary goal: facilitate the overthrow of the Western-minded government in Georgia and put pressure on the overly independent President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.

Part II: The Multitude of Problems in Georgian Domestic Politics

According to historians there are nearly twenty different small ethnic groups that can be grouped under the common term of 'Georgians', even though many of these people have not always had friendly relations with one another. Less than one hundred years ago, the Russian Empire only recognized the governorate of Tiflis (Tbilisi), where the Georgian people were the majority, as 'Georgia'. Abkhazia, Adjara, Mingrelia and many other regions that form modern Georgia, were not part of it. Today, scientists assert that the Ossetians and Abkhazians are not related to Georgians at all. Abkhazians and their close relatives, the Circassians (also known as the Cherkess), are descended from the mountain tribes of the Adyghe people and were known as excellent freedom fighters already against the Byzantine Empire, as well as against all other conquerors such as the Turks, Russians and in modern times, the Georgians. When the Russian Czar Alexander II tried to impose his power on Abkhazia in the 19th century, the entire local population rebelled against it. The Czar's forces brutally suppressed the rebellion in 1866. Most of the Abkhazian and Circassian people were either killed, or deported to Turkey.

The Ossetians consider themselves to be descendants of the nomadic Polovets tribes who reigned over the Southern Russian steppes in ancient times. The Ossetians joined the Russian Empire in 1770, when the elders of their 24 tribes went to the Russian military commandant in Kizlyar and stated their desire to become subjects of the Empire. The Czar agreed to this, and in return promised to defend the Ossetians from attacks by their belligerent neighbors. The Ossetians were obligated to keep the Georgian Military Road in order and provide assistance to the transiting Russian units and couriers. However, the Ossetians were not very eager to fulfill their promises, which caused several problems for the imperial officials.

Georgian historians claim that until about 150 years ago, there were no permanent Ossetian inhabitants living in Georgia. Ossetian settlements were not established until the Georgian nobility recruited Ossetian fighters living north of the Greater Caucasus Range. These soldiers also brought their families and settled in a fairly compact area, thus establishing what is today South Ossetia. Unlike the Ossetians and the Abkhazians, who were occasionally rebellious, the Georgian nobility was extremely loyal to the Russian Empire, which cast them in a good light in St Petersburg. In return the Czar granted tax exemptions and control over the Abkhazians, Ossetians, Mingrelians and the Svans. The Georgians were truly diligent in providing services

especially when it came collecting tribute, which allowed them to line their own pockets as well. This caused many tensions between the Georgians and the aforementioned peoples.

Abkhazia was an autonomous dukedom until the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the subsequent civil war. South Ossetia, however, had been subject to Georgian rule already since the Czarist time. The breakup of the Russian Empire in 1917 enabled Georgia to declare independence and Abkhazia and South Ossetia attempted to follow suit. Georgia was against this and deployed its forces to Abkhazia in July 1918. The Georgian forces conquered multiple Abkhazian towns until General Denikin, of the Russian White Army, intervened and pushed the Georgians out of Abkhazia. The next Georgian military action occurred in 1920 against South Ossetia. It was a bloody conflict with possibly over 5000 Ossetians killed, and hundreds escaping across the mountains to North Ossetia.³ These two conflicts established a strong sense of hostility between the three nations and made their co-existence within one state quite problematic.

After the 1917 Revolution Joseph Stalin established the Georgia that we know today. During the long and bloody civil war, the Red Army eliminated the independent Republic of Georgia in 1921. Immediately afterwards, the internal borders within the Bolshevik-occupied territory were adjusted. Stalin, who was the People's Commissar for Nationality Affairs at the time, was quite generous towards his historic homeland. Upon his insistence, both North and South Ossetia were assigned to Georgia as autonomous oblasts. In December 1921, the government of Red Russia decided to create the federation between Abkhazia and Georgia. In 1931, Stalin as the leader of the Soviet Union issued a decree that reduced Abkhazia's status to an autonomous Soviet Republic within the Georgian Soviet Republic. This was followed by an active 'Georgification' process in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The use of the Latin alphabet, which was the basis of the Abkhazian and Ossetian written languages, was banned. The languages themselves were erased from the school curricula. Education and written business were conducted in Georgian, using the Georgian alphabet. A widespread campaign of relocating Georgians to Abkhazia was initiated. Stalin further advanced this by ordering the deportation of the Greeks from Abkhazia to Siberia after the Great Patriotic War. And while moving to South Ossetia was not appealing to the Georgians, several Georgian villages were established there nevertheless.

³ Шенин 2009, с. 10–12.

The totalitarian order of the Soviet Union smothered the hostilities between the different nations living in Georgia, but tensions flared up again during the *perestroika* era. On March 18th, 1989, more than 30,000 Abkhazians gathered for a convention, where they declared their intent to secede from Georgia and restore their status as a Soviet Republic. This was unacceptable to Tbilisi, and the situation culminated on July 15th–16th, 1989 with an armed clash between Abkhazians and Georgians in Sukhumi where 17 people were killed and 448 wounded. Similar events occurred in South Ossetia, where the parliament of the autonomous oblast decided to become an autonomous republic within the Georgian Soviet Republic.⁴

In the spring of 1991, a Georgian nationalist named Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the President of Georgia. He was completely opposed to any part of the state having autonomy or independence. Tbilisi's revocation of South Ossetian autonomy resulted in an armed conflict between the Ossetians and Georgian police and National Guard units in Tskhinvali. There were exchanges of fire throughout the year in South Ossetia. At the same time, a civil war broke out in Georgia between the government's forces and the opposition's armed National Guard groups led by Tengis Kitovani. In January 1992, President Gamsakhurdia was forced to leave Tbilisi. He later died under mysterious circumstances.

In March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze became the President of Georgia. He decided to address the issue of rebel territories by turning to Russian President Boris Yeltsin for support. As Yeltsin himself was having difficulties with the independence movements of small states in the Northern Caucasus, he decided to support his former colleague. On June 24th, 1992, Yeltsin and Shevardnadze signed a bilateral "Agreement on the Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict" in Sochi, later referred to as the Sochi Treaty. It was agreed that a joint control commission would be established, and tasked with assuring the security of a demilitarized zone as prescribed by article 3 of the Treaty. According to the agreements of the Sochi Treaty, the control commission would be comprised of representatives of four parties: Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and North Ossetia. In order to guarantee the execution of the commission's decisions, the parties agreed to form combined peacekeeping forces comprised of three 500-men battalions from Russia, Georgia and North Ossetia, respectively.⁵

⁴ Шенин 2009, с. 16–17.

⁵ Elling, I.; Kaas, K.; Liik, K.; Maigre, M.; Suhhov, I. 2009. 2008. aasta augustisõja mõju Lõuna-Kaukaasia regioonis. Analüüs. Rahvusvaheline Kaitseuringute Keskus. <<http://www.riigikogu.ee/doc.php?52635%E2%80%8E>>, (12.07.2013).

On July 23rd, 1992, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia declared its independence and established the Abkhazian Republic with an area of 8660 km². Tbilisi responded by deploying forces to the rebel territory in August 1992. A long and bloody war between Georgia and Abkhazia then broke out. The Abkhazians achieved victory in September 1993 with support from Russians and Chechen volunteers led by Shamil Basayev. The Georgian forces and approximately 250,000 Georgian civilians living in Abkhazia were expelled. According to various accounts, the Abkhazians and their allies murdered from 13,000 to 20,000 Georgian civilians over the course of the war.⁶ As a result, the Georgian government was forced to accept Abkhazia's independence.

The conflict parties signed an armistice called the Moscow Treaty on May 17th, 1994. Russia was an intermediary, and was not a party to the treaty. The Treaty stipulated a demilitarized security zone along the Georgian-Abkhazian border that was to be manned by CIS peacekeeping forces and UN military observers.⁷ The UN Security Council later ratified the treaty to allow a maximum peacekeeping force of 3000 CIS soldiers to be deployed to Abkhazia. The UN "UNOMIG" observer mission was established to verify that the treaty requirements in Abkhazia were being met. In response to requests from Georgia and Abkhazia, the CIS heads of states confirmed that on August 22nd, 1994 they had deployed a peacekeeping force to the Abkhazian and Georgian conflict zone.⁸ Russian units already in Abkhazia were assigned the status of CIS peacekeeping forces. Although it was formally a CIS mission, the peacekeeping force was solely comprised of Russian units. The continuation of the peacekeeping operation has been reviewed periodically and its mandate has been extended with Georgian confirmation.⁹ The OSCE established its own mission in December 1993 to facilitate a peaceful solution to the conflict. It should be noted that both the CIS and the OSCE were under strong Russian influence at the time. These institutions even had the right to veto the Georgian government's decisions on certain issues.

⁶ **Human Rights Watch/Helsinki. Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict** 1995. – Human Rights Watch Arms Project, Vol. 7, No. 7, March. <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Georgia2.htm>>, (15.07.2013).

⁷ **Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces.** <<http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/services/cds/agreements/pdf/geo1.pdf>>, (16.10.2015).

⁸ **Decision of the CIS Council of Heads of States of 22 August 1994 on usage of Collective Forces to maintain peace in the conflict zone of Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.** <http://www.rrc.ge/law/gad_1994_08_22_e.htm>, (16.10.2015).

⁹ **Kaas, K.** 2008. Gruusia-Vene kriisi areng ja tagamaad. Rahvusvaheliste Kaitseuringute Keskus, 07.05.2008. <http://www.icds.ee/fileadmin/failid/Kaarel_Kaas_-_ABH_Taust.pdf>, (16.07.2013).

By 2003, the situation in Georgia under the leadership of then President Shevardnadze had become dire. The state budget was empty, the communal economy and the economy as a whole were on the verge of collapse, many enterprises were out of business, and corruption was rampant. The Georgian military, which had experienced several defeats in the 1990's, was also on the verge of collapse. The national defense budget for 2002 was only 36 million lari (ca 22 million US dollars). The Defense forces no longer functioned as a system. Shevardnadze, who felt that the state's weaknesses posed a grave threat, turned to the West for help. The response was positive. The US-led "Georgia Train and Equip Program" or GTEP deserves special attention. Under the auspices of the 'Global War on Terror', the program ran from April 2002 to April 2004 at a total cost of 64 million US dollars. Under the program, three battalions of the Georgian 11th Infantry Brigade (now the 1st Brigade) and the 16th Mountain Battalion of the National Guard, a total of 2702 troops, received counterterrorism and counter-guerrilla training. The US also provided Georgia with 10 Iroquois UH-1H utility helicopters for free. Ukraine donated 10 L-29 training aircraft, and the Soviet-built missile boat "Tbilisi". Georgian officers were also invited to study at US, German, Turkish, Ukrainian and Baltic military schools.¹⁰ The preparation of leaders for the defense forces, however, took more time.

As a result of the wars in the early 1990s, Tbilisi lost control over not only Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also over Adjara, which is populated by Muslim Georgians who are also known as the Lazi people (see Figure 2). Turkey had occupied this territory in the 17th century, and converted the locals to Islam by force. As a result of the Russo-Turkish wars, Russia annexed Adjara on July 13th, 1878, and justified their actions by invoking the Berlin Congress decree. When the Soviet regime was established in Georgia in 1921, the territory surrounding the port of Bathumi was declared as the Adjara Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and a part of the Georgian SSR. Decades later, while the Soviet Union was breaking up, Adjara did not develop an independence movement like that of Georgia. Instead, local separatists joined with the Communists in a union against Georgia. On April 22nd, 1990 there was a separatist demonstration held under red flags in the Lenin Square, in Bathumi. The group demanded complete independence for Adjara.

¹⁰ **The Tanks of August** 2010. Ed. by Ruslan Pukhov, Foreword by David Glantz. Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. Moscow, Russia, p. 11. <http://www.cast.ru/files/The_Tanks_of_August_sm_eng.pdf>. (27.07.2013). [Hereinafter *The Tanks of August* 2010]

In April 1991, in order to prevent Adjara from becoming an independent Communist state, Aslan Abashidze, the former Georgian Deputy Minister of Services, who was acting as a special commissar from Tbilisi, declared himself as the Chair of the Adjara Parliament. Abashidze came from an aristocratic background and ruled Adjara as a feudal dukedom. He imposed a local autocratic regime over the territory and made it largely independent of Georgia. In 1998, Abashidze was elected as the President of Adjara. Under his rule, Adjara established its own armed forces and no longer paid taxes to Georgia. Vehicles going to Adjara from Georgia had to pass police checkpoints at the border and pay a certain tax. According to a 2002 census, there were 376,000 people living in Adjara, over 90% of whom were Georgians.¹¹

It became obvious to the Georgians that Shevardnadze had been exhausted as a president. Some young and ambitious Georgian politicians were able to quickly establish a strong opposition party called the United National Movement that became very popular among the people. Their candidate for President was the talented and energetic Mikheil Shaakashvili. Born in 1967 to the family of a history professor, Shaakashvili had graduated from several universities and attained a Master's degree in law from Columbia University in New York. In the fall of 2003, after accusations of election fraud by the international public were leveled against the incumbent President, as well as his supporters, sharp clashes broke out and forced a second round of elections, which were held on January 4th, 2004. These resulted in an overwhelming victory by the opposition. Shaakashvili became the President of Georgia. One of his most important campaign promises was to quickly reincorporate the separatist territories. The new leadership initiated this process immediately. Already in April of 2004, Shaakashvili with the help of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was able to join Adjara to Georgia in a peaceful manner with South Ossetia being slated as next, and then ultimately, Abkhazia.

South Ossetia covers an area of 3900 square kilometers and is centrally wedged into the territory of Georgia. It is separated from North Ossetia (Russia) by the Dvaleti Ridge of the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range. The only year round access road between the two Ossetian territories is the Trans-Caucasian Highway that runs south along the Great Liakhvi river valley and through the 3700 meter Roki tunnel. Until August 2008, there were fourteen large Georgian villages in South Ossetia. Eight of them had strategic significance: Tamarasheni, Achabeti, Kurta, Kekhvi, Kheiti, Dartshemi, Kamerti

¹¹ **Adjara**. – Wikipedia. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adjara>>, (09.06.2015).

and Tsiakana. Together, they form an enclave called the Liakhvi Corridor, named after the river that flows through them. These villages separate the South Ossetian capital in the south from the northbound highway leading to Java and the Roki tunnel. In order to avoid driving through these hostile Georgian villages, the Ossetians built an alternate road west of the villages called the Zarski bypass. There were two more Georgian villages west of Tskhinvali: Avnevi and Nuli. Another small Georgian enclave consisting of the villages of Prisi, Berula, Argvitsi, and Eredvi was located east of Tskhinvali. Georgia put a great deal of effort into improving the livelihood of all of these villages by building new houses and establishing schools and shops. In order to facilitate easier access to the Georgian villages, Tbilisi also built another road that arced around Tskhinvali from the east. The city of Tskhinvali itself lies on a plain, and covers an area of 1.5 by 3 kilometers. To the east and northeast of Tskhinvali are the Prisi Heights. These enable easy control over the city and its surroundings. Before the conflict in 2008, there were a total of 45,000 to 50,000 people living in South Ossetia, 18,000 of them being Georgians.

Since 2001 the separatist territory had been led by a pro-Moscow government that was hostile towards Georgia. The head of the government, Eduard Kokoity, was a colorful figure with a dark past. With his ascent to power, the tensions between the Ossetians and Georgians, which had waned significantly in the past, started to again escalate. The corrupt and criminal government of South Ossetia facilitated organized crime and smuggling in the separatist territory, and this had a negative influence on Georgia.

When the President of Georgia visited the Georgian villages of South Ossetia in January 2004, he announced that it would be the last time that South Ossetia and Abkhazia would not participate in Georgian elections.¹² Under the guise of fighting illegal trade and smuggling, Tbilisi deployed its Ministry of Interior Special Forces and police to the Georgian villages in May 2004. This evoked a strong reaction from the Ossetians. Soon, armed incidents with casualties were occurring regularly between the Ossetians and the Georgian forces. Shaakashvili's attempts to gain control over the rebel territory were unacceptable to Tskhinvali as well as to the gradually strengthening Kremlin, which had just recently "pacified" Chechnya.

¹² Шенин 2009, с. 28–29.

Part III: Russia Prepares for War

The period between October 1993 and August 1999 was a relatively peaceful one in Russian–Georgian relations. The Russian Federation under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin was struggling with economic difficulties and had its hands full solving the country’s problems, especially with the first war in Chechnya that lasted from 1994 to 1996. Facing a difficult situation with numerous small ethnicities pursuing independence, Yeltsin simply could not afford to promote separatism in other post-Soviet states (who were by now independent CIS member states), including Georgia. The prevailing fear of states breaking away was so great – the presidents of CIS member states issued a communique denouncing separatism and endorsed Georgia’s territorial integrity on January 19th, 1999.¹³ It should be noted, that during this six-year period, there was slow but relatively encouraging progress in the restoration of trust and cooperation between the peoples of Georgia and Abkhazia and especially between Georgia and South Ossetia.

This period of peace ended in 1999 when Vladimir Putin became the President of Russia. The new president saw the restoration of Russian political, economic and military control over the post-Soviet space as one of his highest priorities. All methods and tools were deemed suitable, especially those that weakened the independence movements of former Soviet republics, including the support of pro-Russian separatists. The world witnessed it in Moldova, in Armenia, and then again later when Russia started to question Ukraine’s ownership of the Crimean Peninsula. Putin also radically altered the Russian attitudes towards Georgia and its wish to restore control over the separatist territories. Russia proceeded to pressure and blackmail Georgia, as well as provide comprehensive support to the separatist enclaves. In December 2000, Moscow unilaterally withdrew from the CIS Treaty, which had guaranteed visa-free movement between CIS members, and imposed a visa regime on Georgia. At the same time, this visa regime was simplified for the territories of Abkhazia, Adjara, and South Ossetia.¹⁴ The Russian Special Services were tasked with providing all kinds of support to the separatist forces in Georgia.

¹³ **Georgia near Exit from CIS 2006.** – The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, May 11. Volume 3, Issue 92.

¹⁴ **Russians Send a Message to Georgians: Toe the Line.** – New York Times, December 21, 2000 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/21/world/russians-send-a-message-to-georgians-toe-the-line.html>>, (16.10.2015).

In December 2001, presidential elections were held in South Ossetia. They were won by Eduard Kokoity, the former South Ossetian trade representative in Moscow who had close ties to the Russian Special Services. Several days after the inauguration, the new President held a meeting with the South Ossetian elite behind closed doors. There he introduced his plan to launch a war against Georgia in order to achieve South Ossetian independence. Most of the participants considered such plan to be too risky, and refused to adhere to it. Later, those who did not agree with Kokoity's plan somehow disappeared from the South Ossetian political arena. They were either thrown in the Tskhinvali prison, found dead, or simply escaped South Ossetia.¹⁵

In 2002, Russia amended its law on citizenship. This enabled the introduction of a wide-scale Russian passportization campaign for the inhabitants of Abkhazia, Adjara and South Ossetia. The puppet governments of these territories actively supported this campaign. Russian passports were issued in an extremely simple manner; cars were sent to villages and cities, and the passports were handed out. The recipients simply had to agree to the terms. This semi-voluntary acquisition of Russian citizenship later became the basis for Moscow's justification for military intervention on behalf of the "Russian citizens" living in Georgia. From an international law perspective, this action had absolutely no legal basis. It did however, directly endanger Georgian sovereignty in these territories. The Swiss politician Heidi Tagliavini who led the European Union's commission in Georgia, noted after the August war that

*Russia systematically gave passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, asserting responsibility for Russians in what it called its "near abroad" without any consultation with Georgia, whose territorial integrity was thus increasingly challenged.*¹⁶

Despite the then Georgian President Shevardnadze's protests, these activities continued and by April 4, 2003, 56% of the South Ossetians already possessed Russian passports.¹⁷

Russia also demanded Georgia's permission to use its airspace to provide support for Russian military operations in Chechnya. The Georgian authorities refused, but Russia simply ignored it. Russian military aircraft entered

¹⁵ **Ларионов, А.; Старовойтова, О.** 2009. Наша общая боль. Сборник статей 2008–2009. Санкт-Петербург: Норма. [Hereinafter *Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009*]

¹⁶ **Tagliavini, H.** 2009. Lessons of the Georgia Conflict. – The New York Times, Opinion, September 30. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/01/opinion/01iht-edtagliavini.html?_r=0>, (16.10.2015).

¹⁷ **Перевозкина, М.** 2004. Автономный режим. – Московский комсомолец, 4. апреля.

Georgian airspace on August 6th, 2002 and bombed several villages in the Pankisi Gorge that were allegedly affiliated with Chechen freedom fighters.

Along with handing out passports, Russia also began guiding the Ossetian and Abkhazian leadership towards achieving independence. Under Russian supervision, Tskhinvali and Sukhumi both signed a treaty on September 7–8th, 2002, that formed a military union directed against Georgia.¹⁸ Both parties to the treaty agreed to provide military and political assistance to each other in the event of Georgian aggression. Several days later, Putin issued an ultimatum to Georgia, and claimed that there was a “terrorist threat” against Russia that originated in Georgia. Putin alluded to Article 51 of the UN Charter and stated his willingness to use force against Georgia.

In January 2003, the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity turned to Putin and requested that Russia recognize South Ossetian independence. Russia reacted by sending a large shipment of weaponry (including T-55 tanks) to the separatist region through the Roki tunnel. The weapons were deployed against the village of Java in the north, where international observers lacked access. It should be noted here that these weapons were turned over to the separatists a year before the Rose Revolution and Mikheil Shaakashvili’s ascent to power in January of 2004.

Russian military bases in Georgia also had become a serious point of contention between Moscow and Tbilisi. Despite obligations undertaken at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, Russia continued to delay this process by all possible means. During the bilateral talks in February of 2003, Georgia demanded to completion of this process within three years, with 2006 as the deadline. Russia opposed it, claiming that it would take 11 years to dismantle and redeploy the bases to Russia, or by the year 2014. The relations between the two countries deteriorated to the point that the then Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov announced that Russia would not rule out preemptive strikes “in various parts of the world to assure its security”.¹⁹

After parliamentary elections in Georgia in October 2003, the separatist territories intensified their contacts with Moscow. The Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze “visited” Moscow six times between November 13th, 2003 and May 6th, 2004. Also, the Russian Foreign Minister held a meeting with the South Ossetian, Adjara and Abkhazian leaders in November 2003 where

¹⁸ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 19.

¹⁹ Россия: „Военинформ“, военный информационный бюллетень за октябрь 2003. г. Информационное агентство Министерства обороны РФ „Военинформ“, 11 декабря 2003 г.

they agreed to speed up the process of providing Russian citizenship to the inhabitants of these territories and further ease the visa regime. Georgia strongly protested these measures, but in vain.²⁰

When Mikheil Shaakashvili became the Georgian President, he wished to maintain good relations with Russia. He conducted the first official state visit to Russia and met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on February 11th, 2004. According to parties present, the heads of state had a mutually pleasant impression of each other. Putin, however, demanded two things from his Georgian colleague: first, abolish the requirement for Russia to withdraw its military bases, and second, keep the Minister of National Security, Valeri Khaburdzhania who was close to the Russians, in his position. President Shaakashvili was not ready to meet those demands. First, foreign military bases on another state's territory endangered its sovereignty. Second, Georgia could not afford to have a person with close ties to the Russian FSB as the head of national security. Khaburdzhania was relieved from his position and reassigned as the Deputy Prosecutor General.

The process of Adjara rejoining Georgia fortunately occurred in a peaceful manner. As Adjarians and Georgians are the same people, there were no armed hostilities. This was also facilitated by Russia's neutral attitude towards the reunification. The Adjaran leader Aslan Abashidze was evacuated to Moscow on the Russian Foreign Minister's aircraft on May 6th, 2004. Shaakashvili thanked Putin for his contribution to the peaceful solution of the Adjaran conflict. Putin's response was ice cold: "But now remember this, we did not get involved in Adjara, however, do not expect such a gift in South Ossetia and Abkhazia."²¹ Shaakashvili soon responded by declaring Georgia's intent to apply for NATO membership.

Immediately after the reunification of Adjara and Georgia, Moscow made several decisions regarding South Ossetia. Russia launched an intense campaign to establish Russian military bases in South Ossetia. One base, in Ugardanta, 1.5 km west of Java, was built to store equipment and technology, and to provide housing for up to 2500 troops. Another was established in Tskhinvali for the enlarged contingent of 2000 Russian "peacekeepers". The Russian military school in Vladikavkaz, the North Ossetian capital, began training officers for the South Ossetian armed forces. Russia also initiated a "reinforcement process" for the breakaway region's security forces'

²⁰ **Georgia protests over Russia visa move** 2003. – Rustavi-2 TV, December 9.

²¹ **Mikheil Saakashvili's meeting with Georgian Parliament members**. 24. August 2008. <<http://www.president.gov.ge/?1=E&m=0&sm=1&st=0&id=2721Your>>, (12.07.2013).

leadership by appointing Russian active duty military officers to key positions in the Ossetian military and security structures. For example, Russian Colonel Anatoli Barankevich who had combat experience from Afghanistan and Chechnya was appointed as South Ossetian Minister of Defense.

In June 2004, South Ossetian separatists received a large amount of heavy weaponry, including tanks, “Grad” MLRS and “Igla” MANPADS, from Russia.²² Moscow’s goal was to turn the ill-equipped and badly trained self-defense formations into a proper 7000 men strong army.²³ On July 8th, 2004, Georgian authorities seized nine trucks carrying weapons and ammunition that had been sent from Russia to South Ossetia. Moscow directed the Ossetians to respond, and a day later, the Ossetians arrested approximately 50 Georgian soldiers belonging to the international peacekeeping force in South Ossetia. They were disarmed and forced to kneel in the central square in Tskhinvali so that the local people could mock them in public.

The next night, the Georgian peacekeepers’ checkpoints and the villages of Tamarasheni and Kurta were subjected to Ossetian artillery fire. This marked the beginning of frequent hostilities and provocations along the border between Georgia and South Ossetia and against the Georgian villages in the Liakhvi Corridor. These actions were choreographed by the Russian special services and conducted by the Ossetians. The hostilities lasted until August 20th, 2004 with a total of 19 Georgian soldiers and 5 Ossetians killed.²⁴ In September of 2004, the Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov and the Chief of the General Staff Yuri Baluyevskiy announced that Moscow was ready to conduct preemptive strikes against targets outside Russian territory. This marked the beginning of a terrorist campaign against Georgia. On September 14th, and then again on September 20th, the high voltage power lines *Kartli-2* and *Kavkasioni* were blown up which resulted in large parts of Georgia being left without electricity. New explosions occurred on October 9th and 10th along the *Kartli-2* and *Liakhvi* power lines. Power lines in Western Georgia were also damaged by explosions.

On January 17th, 2005, Moscow appointed Major General Anatoli Yarovoi, the former director of the FSB bureau in Mordovia (Mordvinia), as the director of South Ossetian KGB. In March, Lieutenant General Anatoli Zaitsev, the former deputy commander of the Russian Trans-Baikal Military

²² See <<http://www.milkavkaz.net/forum/viewtopic.php/t=2>>, (10.06.2013).

²³ **Плугатарев, И.** 2005. Южная Осетия готова воевать с Грузией. – Независимая Газета. <http://www.ng.ru/politics/2005-12-12/1_barankevich.html>, (12.07.2013).

²⁴ **Ларионов, Старовойтова** 2009, с. 23.

District, became the Chief of the General Staff of the Abkhazian armed forces.²⁵ On July 4, 2005, Yuri Morozov, the Chief Commercial Officer of an energy company in Kursk who was also South Ossetian President Kokoity's close friend, became the Prime Minister of South Ossetia.

Terrorist acts in Georgia continued in 2005 as well. On February 1st, a bomb exploded at the Gori police station. Three policemen were killed and seventeen people were wounded. The investigation conducted by the Georgian Interior Ministry concluded that the explosion had been organized by the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU.

Beginning in 2004, Moscow significantly increased the financial support to both separatist regions. For example, the Russian aid provided to South Ossetia was more than double the self-proclaimed republic's GDP. Most of this aid consisted of military expenditure. Abkhazia spent 50% of its GDP on the military, while South Ossetia spent 150%.

Several sources indicate, that the initial decision to "solve the Georgian question" by military means was made in Moscow in May 2005. Russia's unexpected proposal to complete the redeployment of its forces from Georgia in an expedited manner was warmly welcomed by Tbilisi. On May 30th, 2005, the Georgian and Russian foreign ministers Salome Zurbishvili and Sergey Lavrov signed the appropriate communique without major debates. Tbilisi celebrated a diplomatic victory without suspecting any potential ramifications. It is unlikely that anyone in Georgia understood that the redeployment could potentially hint at a tentative commencement of Russian military intervention. The Russian General Staff expedited the redeployment in order to prevent the Georgians from capturing armament and equipment from the Russian bases during a war. Any units that would have been left behind to guard such equipment would have been too small to protect it, let alone conduct any military activities against the Georgians. At the same time, Russia continued to actively ship weapons and armament to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and proceeded to reorganize and train their armed units.

The Russian political and military leadership began to act without any attempt to conceal their plans regarding Georgia. On January 26th, 2006, the Russian National Security Council abandoned its support of the peaceful solution to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the so-called Boden Plan. Moscow announced that Russia no longer considered it to be a foundation

²⁵ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 25.

document for negotiations regarding Abkhazia's status.²⁶ The most ominous sign was, however, Putin's statement during a conference on January 31st, 2006: "If anyone thinks that Kosovo can be granted full independence, then why should it not be granted to the Abkhazians or South Ossetians."²⁷ In March 2006, the Russian Prime Minister's aide announced that the decision to unite North and South Ossetia "had in principle already been made". Moscow began to use a combination of steady economic pressure and diversionary activities involving separatist armed movements against Georgia. For example, on January 22nd, 2006, two gas pipelines connecting Russia and Georgia, as well as a power line were blown up on South Ossetian territory. Georgia was left without gas and electricity in the middle of the winter. In March 2006, the Russian government prohibited the import of Georgian wines. In May this was also extended to the import of the very popular mineral water brands Borjomi and Nabeghlavi. In the same month, the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity sent another application to the Russian Constitutional Court to recognize South Ossetian independence.

Beginning in February 2006, the Russian armed forces began direct preparations for a war against Georgia. The 58th Army of the North Caucasus Military District conducted an exercise titled "Kavkaz" that was designed to "provide immediate assistance to the Russian peacekeeping battalion in South Ossetia". During the exercise, several units moved to the beginning of the Roki tunnel that leads to South Ossetia. In addition to the two existing military bases in South Ossetia, Russia began building a third one in Elbachita two kilometers north of Java.²⁸ In Abkhazia, military storage facilities were significantly expanded to store weapons and other supplies for up to 100 000 troops. On June 30th, 2006, Putin issued a decree to establish two new fully professional 4500 strong Mountain Motorized Rifle Brigades (33rd and 34th) in the Caucasus. The brigades were assigned to the village of Botlikh in Dagestan, and the village of Zelenchukskaya in Circassia, both of which were within

²⁶ See also: **Socor, V.** 2006. Moscow Kills Boden Paper, Threatens to Terminate Unomig in Georgia. – Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 3 Issue: 26, February 7. <http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=31362>, (20.07.23013).

²⁷ Путин призывает к „универсальному подходу“ при разрешении межэтнических конфликтах. РТР, 31 января 2006. See also: **Илларионов, А.** 2009. Как готовилась война. <<http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1249596352.php>>, (25.07.2013).

²⁸ **Илларионов, А.** The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999–2008. – **Cornell, S. E.; Starr, F. S.** (eds.). 2009. The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia. New York: Routledge, p. 59.

50–60 km of the Georgian border.²⁹ These brigades were to be fully formed by December 1st, 2006. President Putin then personally inspected both units.

The North Caucasus MD began wide-scale military exercises, with “Kavkaz” as the largest of them. From 2006 to 2008, units from the 58th Army, 4th Air and Air Defense Army as well as battalion tactical groups from the Pskov 76th Guards Air Assault Division (AAD) and the Novorossiysk 7th Guards Airborne (Mountain) Division (AD) participated in the joint maneuvers of the Kavkaz exercise. The exercises grew larger every year. For example, according to Moscow’s official statement, there were approximately 10,000 troops, as well as hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles that were involved in the Kavkaz-2008 exercise.³⁰

On July 7th, 2006, the Russian Federation Council enacted a law that enabled the Russian President to use the armed forces to “subdue terrorist activities outside Russian territory”³¹. Soon after, the Deputy Prime Minister of South Ossetia, Boris Chochiyev announced that 98% of its inhabitants had Russian citizenship. It should be noted, however, that after the wide-scale Russian passportization campaign in South Ossetia, and Abkhazia there was a massive wave of emigration to Russia, Turkey, and other states as the local people quickly started leaving the economically struggling territories to search for jobs and better living conditions.

Along with military preparations, Moscow gradually increased the economic sanctions against Georgia. In December 2005, Russia prohibited the import of Georgian plant food products. In January 2006, Gazprom increased the price of natural gas for Georgia from \$65 to \$110 per thousand cubic meters. In November of 2006, Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller announced that in 2007 the price would be further increased to \$230 per thousand cubic meters. Miller also stated that Russia would cut off the flow of gas supply if the contract were not signed by the deadline. At the end of 2006, the Georgian Minister of Finance Aleksii Aleksishvili informed the Georgian people, that due to the Russian economic sanctions, the Georgian economy had suffered losses of approximately \$250 million or 2.05% of its GDP.³²

On September 27th, 2006, the Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili officially announced the discovery of a wide espionage network

²⁹ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 29–30.

³⁰ *The Tanks of August*, p. 41.

³¹ Совет Федерации наделяет президента полномочиями по использованию вооруженных сил за рубежом. – ИТАР-ТАСС, 7 июля 2006 г.

³² *Gruusia–Venemaа ummikseis* 2006. Analytic report 6/2006, November–December. Baltic Center for Russian Studies. Tallinn, pp 3, 12.

in Georgia led by Russian GRU officers. Georgian counterintelligence had arrested four Russian intelligence officers and eleven Georgian citizens.³³ Moscow expressed unprecedented rage over the capture of their spies. The Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Georgian ambassador for an explanation. In response, the Georgian Interior Ministry produced a video showing Russian officers handing money over to their Georgian contacts. The Russian ambassador in Georgia was formally recalled and the embassy ceased issuing Russian visas for Georgian citizens. Russia also organized a demonstrative evacuation by planes of the Russian diplomats and military members in Georgia. Russian military bases in Akhalkalaki and Bathumi raised their combat readiness and the Russian Defense Minister announced that: “banditism in Georgia has achieved national dimensions”.³⁴ Georgia considered it to be political blackmail and President Shaakashvili referred to the reaction by the Russian leadership as hysterics.

As a sign of good will, the Georgian authorities released all four captured Russian intelligence officers on October 2nd, 2006 and sent them back to Russia. In an odd response, the Russian State Duma approved additional sanctions against Georgia on October 4th, and ordered the establishment of a special Georgian department in the Federal Office of Migration.³⁵ The Russian authorities imposed an embargo on Georgia, and thus completely severed the transport and postal connections to Georgia in a gross violation of the rules of the Universal Postal Union.³⁶ A comprehensive and large-scale anti-Georgian campaign and a witchhunt against Georgians began in Russia. Their quotas for long-term or multiple-entry visas were halved, and Russian schools were ordered to compose lists of students of Georgian origin. Russia also started massive deportations of Georgians via planes. At the same time, the Russian Black Sea Fleet began blocking Georgian ports.³⁷

³³ **Россию поймали в шпионскую сеть** 2006. – Коммерсантъ, 28 сентября. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/708235>>, (28.08.2013).

³⁴ **Российский министр обороны обвиняет Грузию в бандитизме** 2006. – ИТАР ТАСС, 28 сентября.

³⁵ **На Грузин не пожалели законодательства** 2006. – Коммерсант, 5 октября. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/710392>>, (25.08.2013).

³⁶ **Russia suspends all transport, postal links with Georgia** 2006. – USA Today, 3 October. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-10-02-georgia-russia_x.htm>, (29.08.2013).

³⁷ **Russian Navy violating Georgian waters, impeding shipping – Georgian minister** 2006. – AFX Asia (Focus), October 18. <<http://business.highbeam.com/437586/article-1G1-153025758/russian-navy-violating-georgian-waters-impeding-shipping>>, (29.08.2013).

However, by the end of 2006, the Russian leadership understood that the pressure and intimidation campaign against Georgia would not bear fruit. Shaakashvili continued the policy of reunification and moving towards NATO membership. The opinion in Moscow shifted towards a military solution. The information regarding the preparations for war also leaked into the Russian press. In October of 2006 the well-known independent Russian military expert Pavel Felgenhauer announced that “war between Georgia and Russia is inevitable.”³⁸ On October 28th, 2006, during a verbal altercation with Shaakashvili at the CIS Summit, Putin promised to organize a so-called North Cyprus for Georgia – words that would be later followed by action. Later, in 2012, Putin himself admitted in the press that the Russian forces had, with his personal approval, enacted a plan that had been crafted by the Russian General Staff at the end of 2006 and in the beginning of 2007. He also admitted that the Russian military had also been training the South Ossetian territorial defense troops at that time.³⁹

Meanwhile, Russia also continued to strengthen the separatist regimes’ military leadership with battle-experienced Russian officers. For example, on December 11th, 2006, Moscow assigned General Andrei Laptev, a Chechen war veteran, as the South Ossetian Defense Minister. General Laptev replaced Colonel Anatoli Barankevich who became the Chairman of the South Ossetian Security Council.

In 2007, Russia announced that it would no longer follow the CFE Treaty. And on February 10th, 2007, Putin gave his famous bellicose speech at the Munich Security Conference that signaled the end of the thaw in international relations and served as an open declaration of Russian opposition to the West. One of Putin’s ultimate demands was the halt of NATO’s eastward expansion, especially concerning Ukraine and Georgia. Shaakashvili gave a characteristic response by stating that Georgia would become a NATO member in 2009. After the exchange of such sharp statements, international observers and experts began to openly discuss the eventuality of war between Russia and Georgia. This prognosis proved to be correct. Russian Special Forces, military forces, and the separatist units commenced with even more forceful and systematic provocations towards Georgia. On March 11th, 2007, Russian combat helicopters attacked Georgian administrative offices in Upper

³⁸ *Эхо Москвы* 2006, 2 октября. <<http://www.echo.msk.ru/>>, (29.08.2013).

³⁹ *Путин рассказал о подготовке к войне с Грузией* 2012. – Lenta.ru, <<http://lenta.ru/news/2012/08/08/putin/>>, (30.08.2013). [Hereinafter *Путин рассказал о подготовке 2012*]

Abkhazia. The next day, Georgian villages in the Kodori Valley were shelled by artillery, and later attacked by Russian combat helicopters. On March 25th, a Georgian police patrol in South Ossetia was ambushed and two officers were killed. On May 11th, the South Ossetian leader Kokoity announced the complete blockade of Georgian villages in South Ossetia.⁴⁰ On June 27th, Russia unexpectedly began the hasty withdrawal of its forces from Georgia, and this activity which earlier the Russians had said would take 11 years, was actually completed in 5 months. On August 6th, two Russian Su-25 aircraft entered Georgian airspace and attacked the Tsitelubani radar station near the South Ossetian border. The failure of one of the missiles to detonate allowed the Western experts to identify it as being of Russian origin.⁴¹ Georgia issued a formal accusation against Russia, and Russia, as usual, denied its involvement.

The declaration of Kosovo's independence on February 17th, 2008, enraged the Russian leadership and moved the preparations for the Georgian war into its final phase. Four days later, Putin met with Shaakashvili and the Georgian Foreign Minister David Bakradze for the last time. The Georgian President later repeated Putin's words to the members of the Georgian Parliament:

*As for the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in this regard we are not responding to you, but to the West—America and NATO, and in connection to Kosovo. You should not worry, and it shouldn't bother you. What we do will not be directed against you but will be our response to them.*⁴²

On March 1st, 2008, Moscow named the combat-experienced General Vasily Lunev, the former deputy commander of the Siberian Military District, as the new South Ossetian Defense Minister. The South Ossetian and Abkhazian parliaments called for Russia to recognize their independence, respectively on March 4th and March 7th, 2008. On March 21st, 2008, Russian State Duma

⁴⁰ **Движение транспорта в зоне грузино-осетинского конфликта остановлено** 2007. – РИА Новости, 11 мая.

⁴¹ **Cornell, S. E., Smith, D. J.; Starr, F. S.** 2007. The August 6 Bombing Incident in Georgia: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Region. – Silk Road Paper, October. Central Asia – Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program. <<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0710Georgia.pdf>>, (30.08.2013).

⁴² **Georgian pundits comment on results of Putin-Saakashvili meeting** 2008. – 24 Saati, February 28. <http://www.parliament.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec_id=1329&info_id=21678&lang_id=ENG>, (11.08.2013). [Hereinafter *Georgian pundits 2008*]

adopted a resolution promoting the international recognition of the breakaway republics.⁴³ In April, the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, citing one Russian diplomat, wrote:

*The Foreign Ministry recommended that the Russian President recognize Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence under two circumstances: either when Georgia begins accession to NATO or if it conducts aggression towards these two republics.*⁴⁴

Dmitry Rogozin, the then Russian ambassador to NATO stated on March 11th that the actual secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia would commence immediately if there was any possibility of Georgia's accession to NATO.⁴⁵

During the NATO Bucharest Summit on April 3rd–4th, 2008, the Alliance refused both to extend the invitation for membership, and to grant the Membership Action Plan to Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, Georgia was assured that it would remain a potential candidate for membership. This provided further incentives for Moscow. On April 8th, Foreign Minister Lavrov announced that Russia “would do everything in its power to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO”.⁴⁶ In the spring of 2008, during a conversation with NATO military officers, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Yuri Baluyevski warned them quite openly of the imminent invasion of Georgia by Russian armed forces. NATO officials later admitted that they did not take such statements seriously.⁴⁷

On April 16th, 2008, the Russian President Medvedev ordered the federal government and regional governments to establish direct contacts with the leadership in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. This essentially meant that both territories were being annexed by Russia. The EU, OSCE, NATO, US, United Kingdom, France and Germany all denounced this move and called for its abolishment, but in vain.

⁴³ **Перевозкина, М.** 2008b. Полет на опережение. – Независимая Газета, 14 июля. <http://www.ng.ru/cis/2008-07-14/1_abhazia.html>, (30.08.2013).

⁴⁴ **Перевозкина, М.** 2008a. Москва ответит НАТО Абхазией. – Независимая Газета, 14 апреля. <http://www.ng.ru/cis/2008-04-14/1_abhazia.html>, (30.08.2013).

⁴⁵ **Rogozin: Gruusia võib mässulised piirkonnad kaotada.** – Reuters/BNS, 11.03.2008.

⁴⁶ **Москва не допустит вступления Украины и Грузии в НАТО 2008.** – РИА Новости, 8 апреля.

⁴⁷ **Vinocur, J.** 2009. Georgia is a focal point in US-NATO Russian tensions. – The New York Times, 4 May. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/world/europe/05iht-politicus.html?pagewanted=all>>, (02.09.2013).

Starting April of 2008, Russian armed forces commenced open armed attacks against the Georgian military. On April 20th, 2008, a Russian MiG-29 from the Gudauta airfield in Abkhazia shot down a Georgian reconnaissance UAV in Georgian air space. The MiG, which was in Georgian air space illegally, immediately returned to Russian air space after the attack. The camera onboard the UAV managed to photograph the attacker and send the photos to the control station before crashing. Russia naturally denied its involvement. The investigation conducted by the UN Mission in Georgia confirmed that the attacker was a Russian aircraft. In May 2008, Russian forces shot down two other Georgian UAVs in one week. At the same time, Russia encouraged the South Ossetian and Abkhazian regimes to expand their armed provocations against Georgia.

The Russian General Staff prepared for the upcoming war thoroughly and deliberately. In violation of CIS-wide agreements concerning peace operations, Moscow began deploying additional units to Abkhazia in April 2008, under the guise of reinforcing the peacekeeping units. One additional motorized rifle battalion (MRBn) was deployed from the 15th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade (MRBr) and two from the 131st Independent MRBr in Maikop.⁴⁸ These were soon joined by a battalion tactical group from the 7th AAD in Novorossiysk. The Russian “peacekeepers” were also further reinforced by two Army Spetsnaz companies.⁴⁹

In April and May of 2008, the Russian Black Sea Fleet held eight exercises, placing special emphasis on amphibious landings. In May, Moscow announced that it had increased the number of Russian “peacekeepers” in Abkhazia to 2542.⁵⁰ According to Georgian sources, there were already 4000 troops. This exceeded the limit set by the existing agreement by 1000.

In the first days of May, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) called up a significant number of former military helicopter pilots with flying experience in mountainous terrain for 17-day reservist exercises. On May 26th, 2008, 400 Russian railway troops were deployed to Abkhazia in order to quickly repair the 54 km line between Sukhumi and Ochamchira that had been unused for decades. This was a warning sign that the Russian forces were preparing for pre-war deployment. In the beginning of June, additional

⁴⁸ The average size of a Russian motorized rifle or air assault battalion in the August war was about 450 to 500 troops without reinforcements.

⁴⁹ **The Tanks of August**, p. 41.

⁵⁰ **Минобороны РФ грозит увеличением миротворцев в зоне грузино-абхазского конфликта – до предельного лимита 2008.** – NEWSru.com, 08.05.2008. <http://www.newsru.com/russia/08may2008/minobor_print.html>, (15.06.2013).

Su-25 and Su-27 aircraft were deployed to the Gudauta air base in Abkhazia. In order to prepare the forces for the upcoming operation, the Russian military conducted several exercises in the Caucasus region from June to August. In the first half of June, the newly formed 34th Brigade in Zelenchukskaya conducted a ten-day exercise to practice combat activities “in an unknown area far away from the permanent duty station.”

On June 21st, 2008, the Russian independent analyst Pavel Felgenhauer announced during an interview with the Georgian newspaper *Rezonansi* that the political decision by Moscow to start a war in Georgia had already been made in April. He predicted that the war would commence in Abkhazia and no later than mid-August.⁵¹

On July 6th, 2008, the exercise “Kavkaz 2008” commenced in the mountains near the Georgian border wherein the North Caucasus Military District, FSB and Air Assault Forces units participated with approximately 10,000 troops and 700 armored vehicles. The main aim of the exercise was declared to be rehearsals for a “peace enforcement operation”. Already on the second day of the exercise, the Russian “peacekeeping battalions” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia started to actively reinforce their defensive positions. At the same time, additional Russian air defense missile systems and heavy weaponry were deployed to Abkhazia.

The Russian Air Force systematically violated Georgian air space. In July 2008, four Russian combat aircraft crossed into Georgian air space above South Ossetia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responded to Georgian protests by stating that: “the purpose was to cool hot heads”.⁵² Tbilisi did not remain passive in this situation. On the same day that “Kavkaz 2008” began, Georgia initiated the exercise “Immediate Response 2008” with 1,650 Georgian and US troops participating. However, according to the exercise scenario, these troops rehearsed peacekeeping and rescue activities, not conventional combat. At the end of the exercise, Georgia deployed their units near the South Ossetian border.

Russian strategic intelligence worked well. Moscow was aware of the Georgian plan to retake South Ossetia by force and made preparations for countermeasures. Under the guise of the exercise “Kavkaz 2008”, Russia conducted intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and deployed

⁵¹ **Фельгенгауэр, П.** 2008а: В Москве приняли политическое решение начать войну с Грузией 2008. – Грузия Online, 21.06.2008. <<http://www.apsny.ge/interview/1214072414.php>>, (10.07.2013).

⁵² **Russia confirms its aircraft intruded into Georgia** 2008. – Civil Georgia, July 10, <<http://www.civilgeorgia.ge/eng/article.php?id=18748>>, (10.07.2013).

the necessary units to the locations designated in the plan of attack. After “Kavkaz 2008” ended on August 2nd, one battalion from the 135th and one battalion from the 693rd MRR of the 19th Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) stayed at the training center 30 km north of the Roki tunnel, in the immediate vicinity of the South Ossetian border. This group of approximately 1,500 troops was armed with IFVs, 14 T-72B tanks, and 16 2S3 ‘Akatsia’ type self-propelled artillery systems. The order was received to prepare to advance to South Ossetia through the Roki tunnel, and in the event of a Georgian attack, to immediately begin an offensive towards Tskhinvali. The purpose was to support Russian peacekeepers, prevent Georgian units from reaching deep into South Ossetian territory, and win time until the main force could arrive from Russia.

All the units of the 58th Army that were in the vicinity of South Ossetia received the order to be prepared to enter South Ossetia via the Roki tunnel within 24 to 48 hours. The special Russian military medical troop that arrived at South Ossetia on July 25th, 2008 established a field hospital in the village of Tarskoe capable of handling up to 300 wounded personnel. When Tbilisi inquired into this matter, the Russian MoD cited the “need to provide the local people with consultative and diagnostic aid”.⁵³ All of these preparations later enabled the Russian forces to enter South Ossetia quickly and spoiled the Georgian operational plan.⁵⁴ The North Ossetian leader Teimuraz Mamsurov openly declared to a journalist from *Nezavisimaja Gazeta* that the Russian forces

*will enter Georgia in order to protect Russian citizens and assist the peacekeepers. /.../ There are armored vehicles, including tanks, near the northern end of the Roki tunnel. They have been positioned there for demonstrative purposes, but they won't just sit there.*⁵⁵

In the summer of 2008, Georgia and the international community made several overtures to Russia and the separatists to begin negotiations in order to find peaceful solutions to the conflicts in Abkhazia as well as South Ossetia. Georgia repeated these proposals until August 7th. The United States made their proposal on July 8th, Germany made multiple attempts on July 14th, 18th, 25th, 30th and 31st. The European Union made their proposals on July 19th and between July 22nd and the 24th. The OSCE and Finland made

⁵³ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 45.

⁵⁴ *The Tanks of August*, p. 43–45.

⁵⁵ *Независимая Газета*, 26 июля 2008.

their proposals on July 25th and 30th. Russia and the leaders of the separatist territories rejected all of these proposals.⁵⁶

In order to maintain a façade of acceptability before the world community, Moscow needed an excuse for its aggression against Georgia. In the past, this had been the preferred course of action for Stalin, who along with Hitler “freed the territories of Western Belarus and the Western Ukraine from the Polish capitalists”. In 1939, the NKVD organized a provocation in Mainila, Finland and later accused the Finns of shelling a Soviet border guard station with artillery. The arrival of the Polish submarine “Orzel” to Tallinn, Estonia in September 1939 was used as the justification to establish Soviet military bases in Estonia. Thus, it was necessary to systematically provoke the Georgian government in order to tempt them into taking some injudicious steps.

In July 2008, assaults against Georgian peacekeepers and civilians by Ossetian armed groups suddenly increased, and soon became a daily occurrence. On July 29th, the Ossetians opened fire on international peacekeepers and OSCE observers for the first time. They used artillery and mortars with a caliber of over 100 mm, which were prohibited under the treaty signed after the conflict in 2004. The commander of the international peacekeeping force, Russian Major General Marat Kulakhmetov was forced to acknowledge the violation of the treaty in his report.⁵⁷ On August 1st, a Georgian police patrol car drove over a mine that had been placed by the Ossetians. Five policemen were seriously injured. On the same day, there was an intense exchange of fire between South Ossetian and Georgian troops. After August 1st, such exchanges began to occur more frequently and intensively. The South Ossetian armed groups were tasked with provoking Tbilisi to act in a way that would persuade the world public that Russia was justified in their planned attack on Georgia.

Moscow also prepared a comprehensive information operation. On August 2nd, 2008, four carefully selected Russian TV channel crews arrived in Tskhinvali. On the same day, South Ossetian authorities began evacuating inhabitants from Tskhinvali and the surrounding villages to Russia with great fanfare. More than 20,000 civilians were evacuated.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 44.

⁵⁷ **The Kulakhmetov Report** 2008. – Timeline of Russian Agression in Georgia. Document by the Government of Georgia. 25. August 2008. <http://mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=461&info_id=7664>, (12.07.2013).

⁵⁸ Ларионов, Старовойтова 2009, с. 48

The NATO assessment team that visited Georgia after the war in September 2008 concluded that the Georgian armed forces leadership did not actually have a finalized plan for an offensive in South Ossetia. In the opinion of the NATO team, the Georgian Joint Staff drafted the plan as *ad hoc* on August 6th and 7th, right before the war broke out. The Russians in turn assert that the Georgian plan for seizing South Ossetia had already been approved by the Joint Staff in June 2008. Apparently, the latter was actually the case as when the Estonian Chief of Defense visited Georgia in May 2008, the existence of such a plan was hinted at. It is common in military planning that existing plans are either reviewed or specified immediately before the commencement of operations in order to adapt them to a current situation.

On August 3rd, the Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Nikolai Pankov, the Deputy Director General of the GRU and the Commander of the 58th Army, Lieutenant General Khrulev arrived to Tskhinvali to participate in the South Ossetian Security Council meeting with the separatists' higher political and military leadership. Also present were Major General Kulakhmetov and the commander of the Ossetian peacekeeping battalion "Alania", Konstantin Friyev. According to Georgian intelligence, the purpose of the meeting was to work out the details of the battle plans of the Ossetian armed groups and the units of the 58th Army.⁵⁹ On the same day, the Russian authorities began a mobilization of "volunteers" and Cossacks in support of the Ossetian armed groups in the Northern Caucasus. According to Georgian intelligence, about 300 volunteers signed up the next day.

By order of the North Caucasus Military District headquarters, the units of the 58th Army were deployed to Nizhni Zamagi on August 4th, in the immediate vicinity of the Russian-Georgian border, "to provide help to the peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia in shortest possible time".⁶⁰ Tu-22M3 heavy bombers, and AWACS-type aircraft arrived at the air base in North Ossetia. Georgian intelligence noted that the 33rd MRBr's reconnaissance battalion, and an artillery unit with 40 howitzers entered South Ossetia through the Roki tunnel on August 5th.⁶¹ According to Tbilisi's information,

⁵⁹ **58-я армия РФ готова войти в Цхинвали** 2008. – Грузия Online, 03.08.2008. <<http://www.apsny.ge/news/1217792861.php>>, (14.07.2013).

⁶⁰ **Созаев-Гурьев, Е.** 2008. Российская армия подошла к границе Южной Осетии. – Материал www.russian.kiev.ua. 04 августа 2008. <<http://www.russian.kiev.ua/print.php?id=11603935>>, (14.07.2013).

⁶¹ **David Kezerashvili report to the temporary parliamentary commission**, 27 October 2008, <http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=1329&info_id=21926>, (16.08.2013).

there were already up to 1200 Russian troops in South Ossetia on that day. The large-scale movement of Russian units to the entrance of the Roki tunnel between August 6th and 7th was documented by almost every Russian journalist in the southern part of North Ossetia. A correspondent of the Russian APN news service announced from Vladikavkaz: “The whole republic, everyone, noticed the vast scale of movement of forces towards the [Roki – A.L.] tunnel starting on the evening of the sixth”.⁶² Based on Georgian intelligence, by the evening of August 5th, the following units had gathered near the north entrance of the Roki tunnel:

- The 135th and 693rd MRR of the 19th MRD;
- Two battalion combat teams of the 76th AAD;
- The 217th Air Assault Regiment of the 98th Guards AD;
- Various units from the 31st Independent Airborne Brigade.

In total, there were approximately 11,693 troops, 891 vehicles, and 139 artillery pieces.⁶³

In order to hide these military preparations, Moscow initiated a wide-scale defamatory propaganda campaign against Georgia in both the domestic and the international press. By the afternoon of August 6th, the Georgian leadership had most likely lost all hope that Russia would not intervene in the conflict. President Shaakashvili tried to call the Russian President Medvedev that evening to discuss the dangerous situation that was emerging. The Russian MFA responded by saying: “the time for presidential negotiations has not yet arrived”.⁶⁴ The South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, and the chief negotiator Boris Chochiyev refused to participate in the previously agreed upon meeting with the Georgians on August 7th. The tensions rose further when the Ossetians commenced with heavy weapons fire on the Georgian villages of Avnevi and Nuli. The Georgian military launched counterfire in the Tskhinvali region. The exchange lasted all night. By August 7th, there were already about 50 Russian journalists in South Ossetia, ready to describe the “violent acts of aggressive Georgians”.

⁶² **Война всё спишет!** Саакашвили как европейский шпион 2008, 12.08.2008. <<http://www.apn.ru/column/article20635.html>>, (16.08.2013).

⁶³ **David Kezerashvili report** 2008.

⁶⁴ **Georgian pundits** 2008.

Part IV: Armed Forces Participating in the Conflict

4.1. Georgian Armed Forces

Upon being elected Georgia's president, Shaakashvili eagerly sought to reform the state's armed forces. The new Georgian leadership made no secret of the fact that they considered Russia to be the main military threat. Georgian politicians had two choices regarding the state's military defense, and the composition of the military itself. The first was to adopt a territorial defense approach, which would enable the utilization of all the resources of the state and the people, and which had proven to be the most suitable for conflicts of the 20th century. The second option was to implement the model and consequent military doctrine of the relatively small-scale and expensive so-called expeditionary force concept used by larger Western countries. Having blind faith in everything Western, Shaakashvili chose the second option without either conducting a thorough assessment of the characteristics of Georgia's geostrategic location, or taking into consideration its immediate security threats. Nor did he ever consider a self-defense capability as being necessary even though Georgia was not a member of a collective defense system.

Shaakashvili's choice was likely facilitated by his faith in Georgia soon becoming a NATO member. Georgia's armed forces became fully professional. Due to the lack of contract soldiers and difficulties in recruiting and training, conscription was not abolished completely. The scale of conscription, however, was reduced significantly and focused mostly on guard and rear support units. The Ministry of Defense was fully manned with civilians. In 2007, following the example of the US model, the General Staff was also restructured. The Joint Staff and its Chairman were subordinated directly to the Minister of Defense and the positions of service chiefs and service headquarters were disbanded. Instead seven departments were established in the MoD. These consisted of: personnel, intelligence, operations, logistics, plans and policy, command and signal, military training and education.⁶⁵ Services were to be managed by the respective deputies of the Chairman, but they were largely incapable of fulfilling this task, due to the lack of service headquarters as command elements. The Joint Staff commanded all services and their subunits simultaneously: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Special Operations

⁶⁵ Цыганок, А. 2011. *Война на Кавказе 2008: русский взгляд*. Грузино-осетинская война 8–13 августа 2008 года. 2-е издание, дополненное. Москва: АИРО-XXI 2011, с.57. [Hereinafter *Цыганок 2011*]

Groups, National Guard, Logistics, Training, Intelligence, Military Police and other units.

The new government made a great effort to reform the armed forces and acquire new armament and equipment. The defense budget grew at an extraordinary pace, as demonstrated clearly by the following numbers:

- 2004 – 173.9 million lari (108.7 million US dollars);
- 2005 – 368.9 million lari (230.6 million US dollars);
- 2006 – 684.9 million lari (428.1 million US dollars);
- 2007 – initially 1494.5 million lari (934.1 million US dollars);
- 2008 – 1545.2 million lari (965.7 million US dollars).⁶⁶

As it was increased twice over the year, the 2007 defense budget became the largest in Georgia's history. According to Russian sources, it ultimately exceeded 1 billion dollars.⁶⁷ The 2008 defense budget had also about 1 billion dollars earmarked which meant 8% of the GDP; however, not all of it was used, due to the war. Major investments in national defense enabled the wide-scale acquisition of new armament, armored vehicles and other military equipment from different countries. It also enabled the buildup of new military complexes and the payment of relatively high salaries to Georgian officers and contract soldiers. In November 2005, Shaakashvili approved the first Georgian National Military Strategy, which laid the conceptual foundation for the development of the national defense, military capabilities and the management of the national defense system. Adopting it meant that the Georgian military would be able to adequately react to all existing threats to the state.⁶⁸ The armed forces developed at a steady pace during these years.

In January 2007, the structure of the Georgian armed forces consisted of the Joint Staff, services (Army, Navy, Air Force) and the National Guard. The Army, which was the largest service branch, consisted of four infantry brigades, one artillery brigade, 8 independent battalions (1 tank, 2 light infantry, 1 combat engineer, a chemical defense battalion, as well as medical, communications, reconnaissance, and the air defense battalions. Three out of four brigades (1st, 2nd and 3rd) were manned with active duty officers and contract soldiers. The 4th Brigade that had been formed in 2004 was

⁶⁶ **Processes ongoing in the Defense System of Georgia in 2004–2008.** Posted on April 3, 2008. – newcaucasus.com. <<http://www.one.newcaucasus.com/english-version/processes-ongoing-in-the-defence-system-of/>>, (16.08.2013).

⁶⁷ Шени 2009, с. 43.

⁶⁸ **Strategic Overview of Defense 2007.** Ministry of Defense of Georgia, pp. 12–14.

comprised of Interior Forces units that had been reassigned from the MoI to the MoD, but it was undermanned. There were, in total, 16 993 troops in the Army in 2007.

The Georgian leadership concurred with the president's ambition to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, which in their view could only be achieved through the use of force. They also perceived Russia's increasing aggressiveness. Thus, the Georgian authorities did everything they could in 2007 to develop their armed forces. The Georgian parliament issued a decree on September 14th, 2007, to increase the maximum size of the armed forces from 28 000 to 32 000. Immediately after this, the MoD started a recruitment campaign to finish manning the 4th Brigade, and furthermore, form the new 5th Brigade in Khoni, Western Georgia. In reality, it proved quite difficult to reach the size prescribed by the parliament. The establishment of the 5th Brigade was an arduous task. Its first battalion, the 51st Light Infantry Battalion finished its basic training in March of 2008 and began unit training after that. In August of 2008, other units of the brigade were still in the formation phase, and thus, the 5th Brigade was not yet combat ready at the beginning of the war.⁶⁹

On July 15th, 2008, the Georgian parliament authorized a further increase of the armed forces to 37 000 personnel. The plan prescribed the establishment of the 6th Infantry Brigade and an increase in the size of the Navy and Air Force. On the same day, the process brought about the reorganization of the Independent Combat Engineer Battalion in Gori into a combat engineer brigade.

By the start of the war, the Georgian armed forces consisted of approximately 30 000 personnel: over 17 000 in the Army, about 2000 in the Air Force, 1200 in the Navy, and more than 9000 personnel in the central command, administrative structures, and in the logistics and other support units.⁷⁰

Georgian Army

By August 2008, the Georgian Army consisted of the following units: the Joint Staff and 5 infantry brigades (1st in Gori, 2nd in Senaki, 3rd in Khutaisi, 4th in Vaziani near Thbilisi and the 5th in Khoni, Western Georgia). It must

⁶⁹ **The Tanks of August**, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁰ **Фельгенгауер, П.** 2008b. В Грузии есть кому воевать. И чем воевать. – Независимая Газета. Приложение НВО, 25.07.2008. <http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2008-07-25/13_georgia.html>, (17.08.2013).

be noted that all the brigades were more or less undermanned, both in terms of officers and soldiers. The Georgians never managed to establish the 6th Brigade. The artillery and combat engineer brigades were located in Gori. The seven independent battalions were located in the following locations: the tank battalion with 50 T-72s was in Gori, the light infantry battalion was in Adlija, the medical battalion was in Saguramo, the communications battalion was in Vaziani, the EW battalion was in Kobuleti, the logistics battalion was in Tbilisi, and the air defense battalion was in Khutaisi. Two reinforced battalions (about 2000 troops total) which were the main forces of the best trained and combat ready 1st Infantry Brigade had been deployed to Iraq along with US troops.

The size of a typical Georgian infantry brigade (see Figure 3) was 3265 personnel. The unit consisted of the following substructures and units:

- brigade headquarters (60 troops) and headquarters company (108 troops) with two BMP-1 or BMP-2 IFVs,
- three light infantry battalions (591 troops each),
- one armored battalion (2 tank companies and 1 mechanized company, a total of 380 troops, 30 T-72 tanks and 15 BMP-1 or BMP-2 IFVs),
- one artillery battalion (371 troops, 18 122 mm D-30 howitzers, 12 120 mm mortars, 4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns),
- reconnaissance company (101 troops, 8 vehicles),
- signal company (88 troops, 2 armored vehicles),
- engineer company (96 troops),
- logistics battalion (288 troops).

The main fire support element for the brigades were their organic D-30 light howitzer battalions which were meant to follow the infantry battalions in combat formations. It is noteworthy that there were no specific air defense units in the brigades, meaning that the brigades essentially lacked any air defense, which became painfully apparent later in battle. The only air defense weapons were the four 23 mm ZSU-23-4 self-propelled guns in the artillery battalion that were at best only able to keep hostile attack planes and helicopters further away from the artillery units. There were also a limited number of shoulder-launched Strela-2M, Iгла, Iгла-1, and Grom-2 air defense missiles that had been issued before the war to the infantrymen although the crews lacked the necessary training and preparations. Furthermore, the infantry battalions lacked any organic indirect fire support weapons. The 120 mm mortars were best suited to this task, but their number was limited and for some reason, they had been assigned to the artillery battalions.

The Artillery Brigade was the main fire support element of the Army. It was equipped with heavy artillery and multiple rocket launchers and it also included an anti-armor battalion equipped with anti-tank guided missile launchers. The main task of the Brigade was to fight against the enemy artillery, destroy enemy units and objects, and to provide fire support for its own forces at the centre of gravity. The Brigade's structure included the following elements:

- brigade headquarters,
- 152 mm towed artillery battalion (11x 2A65 “Msta-B” howitzers),
- 152 mm self-propelled artillery battalion (13x 2S3 “Akatsiya” howitzers),
- 152 mm self-propelled artillery battalion (24x Czech “Dana” howitzers),
- an engineer battery from the 203 mm self-propelled artillery battalion,
- multiple rocket launcher battalion (26-28x of BM-21 “Grad”, RM-70 and LAR-160),
- anti-armor battalion,
- training battalion,
- logistics battalion,
- guard company.⁷¹

Air defense was provided by 15 organic ZU-23-2 23 mm light anti-aircraft artillery guns.

The Georgian peacekeeping battalion belonging to the international peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia was manned on a rotational basis by different infantry units. During the first days of the war, it was the 11th Light Infantry Battalion of the 1st Brigade reinforced with a mechanized company from the Independent Tank Battalion. The peacekeeping battalion was located north of Tskhinvali in the Georgian villages of the so-called Liakhvi corridor.

Overall, the armament of the Georgian Army was impressive:

- 191 T-72 tanks with different modifications,
- 56 older T-55 tanks,
- 80 BMP-1 IFVs,
- 74 BMP-2 IFVs,
- 11 BRM-1K tracked reconnaissance vehicles,
- 5 BRDM-2 wheeled reconnaissance vehicles,
- 31 BTR-70 APCs,
- 35 BTR-80 APCs,
- 80 MT-LB multi-purpose tracked armored vehicles.

⁷¹ **The Tanks of August**, p. 18.

Georgian artillery possessed the following weapon systems:

- 6 2S7 “Pion” 203 mm self-propelled guns,
- 14 2S3 “Akatsia” 152 mm self-propelled howitzers,
- 24 “Dana” 152 mm self-propelled howitzers,
- 11 2A65 “Msta-B” 152 mm towed howitzers,
- 3 2A36 “Giatsint-B” 152 mm towed howitzers,
- 109 D-30 122 mm light howitzers.

In addition, Georgia possessed different types of multiple rocket launcher systems such as BM-21 Grad, GradLAR, and RM-70, for a total of 28.

The Georgian infantry had a total of 80 towed 120 mm mortars and approximately 300 60 mm, 81 mm and 82 mm light mortars.

Anti-armor units were armed with a small number of guided missile systems such as *Fagot*, *Faktoria*, and *Konkurs*, as well as 15 MT-12 Rapira type 100 mm anti-tank guns and 40 D-48 type 85 mm anti-tank guns. The Georgians probably planned to compensate for their relatively weak anti-armor capabilities with the use of tanks.

For air defense, the ground units utilized MANPADS systems such as Strela-2M, Igla, Igla-1, and Grom-2, but they also possessed 15 S-60 57 mm towed anti-aircraft guns, 15 ZSU-23-4 23 mm self-propelled anti-aircraft artillery guns and 15 ZU-23-2 23 mm towed light anti-aircraft artillery guns.⁷²

The National Guard that was revived by President Shaakashvili was intended to serve as the second integral component of the Georgian Armed Forces. Initially, it was conceived as a miniature version of the Army. However, it was later reorganized and tasked with preparing the reserve units, organizing mobilization efforts, and preparing a territorial defense, as well as providing assistance to civil authorities in the event of large-scale accidents. In the summer of 2008, there were 2300 people in the National Guard. The development plan envisioned the establishment of 27 National Guard battalions, but by the beginning of the war, fulfillment of this goal was still quite far away. The situation was similar in regards to the preparations of reserve units and their mobilization. The Joint Staff declared in July 2008 that a 45 000 strong reserve has already been completed. In the beginning of the war, however, it became immediately obvious that the reserve was essentially comprised of reservists with only basic soldier training, who had neither been assigned to reserve units nor received any unit-level training. In

⁷² *The Tanks of August*, p. 19.

essence, the reserve units had not been formed. The mobilization infrastructure such as the unit-based mobilization depots with wartime weapons, technology, and equipment as well as the formation centers and posts did not exist at all. However, despite the significant organizational and training-related shortcomings, the Georgian Army in August 2008 was clearly superior to the Russian invasion forces in terms of the quality of armament, technology, communications, and equipment.

The Georgian Air Force

The Georgian Air Force in the summer of 2008 consisted of an air operations center, the Marneuli and Alekseevka air bases, one training center, and two air defense bases. The Marneuli Air Base had squadrons of Su-25 attack aircraft and L-39 training aircraft. The Alekseevka Air Base had one Mi-8 and one UH-1H helicopter squadron and a mixed squadron of Mi-8, Mi-14 and Mi-24 helicopters. The Air Force training center had An-2 light transport aircraft. In the beginning of the war, the Air Force had 10 Su-25 attack aircraft, 2 Su-25 UB training aircraft, 12 L-39C training aircraft, 4 Yak-52 training aircraft, 6 An-2 light transport aircraft, 5 Mi-24V and 3 Mi-24P attack helicopters, 18 Mi-8T/MTV, 2 Mi-14 BT, 6 Bell UH-1H and 6 Bell 212 general purpose helicopters.

The Georgian air defense included an S-125M battery and a Buk-M1 medium range air defense battery, a unit with 18 self-propelled Osa-AK/AKM type missiles, as well as several units equipped with the Israeli RAFAEL short-range air defense missile system. As of the summer of 2008, Georgia had no integrated air defense system.

The Georgian Navy

The Georgian Navy had two bases: the main base in Poti and an auxiliary base in Bathumi. The Navy consisted of a missile craft squadron, a patrol craft squadron, a transport vessel squadron and naval infantry and demining units. The Navy had two missile crafts: one Soviet Type 206MR armed with P-20 missiles, and one French La Combatante armed with Exocet missiles, as well as 8 patrol craft, 4 amphibious assault crafts and 6 smaller crafts.⁷³

After independence, the lack of a national officer corps became the greatest obstacle facing the Georgian Armed Forces. This was also the case for Estonia in the early years when it sought the reestablishment of the Estonian

⁷³ **The Tanks of August**, pp. 20–21.

Defense Forces. However, after nearly 20 years of independence, although Georgia had had sufficient opportunity to raise a new generation of officers, it had nevertheless failed to establish any functioning military education and service systems. As the young state experienced tumultuous times, military officer positions became extremely politicized. Officers on active duty were rotated constantly. The general officer positions were often filled by personnel who lacked the necessary knowledge, skills and experience, but were politically suitable to the current leadership. The government led by President Shaakashvili also pursued a “clean slate” policy without understanding that it takes about 25 years to establish a new officer corps, from a lieutenant to general. Georgia almost completely abolished the employment of officers with Soviet backgrounds who were nevertheless loyal to the Georgian state.

The actual threat of war and the quick expansion of the armed forces and the National Guard both demanded a large number of officers who possessed the appropriate training. However, Georgia almost completely lacked this suitable new contingent of officers. The issue of junior officer training was solved by short basic courses that gave junior officers only superficial theoretical knowledge in the art of war, and basic skills in organizing battles. There were no experienced senior officers for senior positions at the battalion and brigade level, nor were there any in the service headquarters, in the Joint Staff, or in the military positions of the MoD. Thus, in the summer of 2008, most of the Georgian junior officers had at best only completed a one year long officer training course, which meant that they had serious deficiencies in military training and education.

The lack of officers was further exacerbated by the fact that the amount of units created during the Army’s reform grew quickly, and consequently the positions for platoon and company commanders, as well as higher officers, had to be manned within a short span of time. Senior officer education and training was not conducted at all. In this field, the Georgian Armed Forces depended completely on courses conducted in partner nations, where the available slots were quite limited. The August War later demonstrated that the low level of preparation and professionalism of the officers serving at the operational level as well as at the company and battalion level became a decisive factor on the battlefield. The lack of competent officers also had a negative influence on the training of the post-2004 forces. Army units had been trained for peace support and peacekeeping operations, and to a certain extent for offensive operations, but only at the platoon or company level. There had been almost no rehearsals at the battalion or brigade level, or

cooperation among branches, such as the infantry, armor, artillery, and air defense. This was also the case with defensive or delaying operations.

4.2. South Ossetian Armed Formations

Information on the Ossetian armed formations in 2008 varies considerably. While the various sources are more or less in agreement regarding the number of personnel (approximately 3000 troops on active duty and 13 500 reservists), the number of armaments, and the extent of the technology varies. According to Wikipedia, the Ossetians had the following armament:

- Tanks (15),
- 2S3 Akatsia 152 mm and 2S2 Gvozdika 122 mm self-propelled howitzers (24),
- D-30 122 mm towed light howitzers (12),
- BM-21 Grad 122 mm MLRS (6),
- Mortars of different caliber (30),
- 100 mm anti-tank guns (6),
- Different IFVs (52),
- Strela-1 low altitude SAM systems (6),
- Igla MANPADS (200),
- ZU-23-2 23 mm towed light anti-aircraft artillery guns (10),
- Mi-8 transport helicopters (4).⁷⁴

According to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, one of Russian most competent independent newspapers, the amount of weaponry was much larger. According to Oleg Shein, the South Ossetian armed units possessed the following armament:

- Tanks (75 T-72 and 12 T-55),
- BMP-1 and BMP-2 IFVs (80),
- BTR-70 and BTR-80 APCs (about 90),
- BM-21 Grad 122 mm MLRS (23),
- 2S3 Akatsia 152 mm and 2S2 Gvozdika 122 mm self-propelled howitzers (42),
- D-30 122 mm towed light howitzers (about 30),
- 120 mm and 82 mm mortars (40),
- Anti-tank guided missile systems (about 200),

⁷⁴ **Military of South Ossetia.** – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_of_South_Ossetia#Strength>, (14.08.2013).

- D-44 85 mm anti-tank guns (4),
- MANPADS Igla (more than 200),
- SPG-9 anti-tank recoilless rifles (amount unspecified),
- ZU-23-2 23 mm towed light anti-aircraft artillery guns (amount unspecified),
- Helicopters (3).

It appears that all of the Ossetian armament was completely of Russian origin.⁷⁵

Most likely on Moscow's orders, most of the armor and heavy equipment given to South Ossetia was placed away from the Georgian border in depots near the strategically important village of Java. There were several reasons for this. First were the political concerns: the lightly armed international peacekeeping forces were located in Tskhinvali, which was in the immediate vicinity of the Georgian border and surrounded by Georgian villages. These forces were prohibited from possessing heavy weaponry by the treaty. Thus, the deployment of armor and heavy artillery in Tskhinvali would not have gone unnoticed by the Georgians. This would have enabled Tbilisi to publicly accuse Russia of violating the Dagomoss Treaty, the UN peacekeeping regulations, and moreover, of making preparations for aggression. Second, Moscow and the South Ossetian leadership feared the easy capture of heavy weaponry and technology if the Georgians launched a surprise attack. Third, the South Ossetian armed forces were in their establishment phase and thus incapable of properly utilizing armor and heavy artillery in battle, due to insufficient training. However, during the conflict's escalation period, it was shown that the Ossetians actively used mortars and 122 mm light howitzers that had been secretly smuggled into the Tskhinvali region.

Many South Ossetian armed personnel had combat experience from the previous two conflicts. In 1992, the South Ossetians helped North Ossetia during their conflict against the Ingush people. In 1992 and 1993, the South Ossetians joined the Abkhaz people in their war against Georgia. Russia considered the North Ossetian peacekeeping battalion Alania (ca 500 troops) and the South Ossetian OMON⁷⁶ (ca 200 troops) to be the best Ossetian units.

⁷⁵ Шенин 2009, с. 57–58.

⁷⁶ ОМОН (Отряд мобильный особого назначения) is a Russian (originally Soviet) type of special police force which has been established in several post-Soviet states. *Editor's remark.*

4.3. The Abkhazian Armed Forces

In the beginning of the war in South Ossetia, the Abkhazian armed forces consisted of approximately 9000 troops armed with 66 tanks, 116 different armored vehicles, 264 different towed or self-propelled artillery pieces and mortars, including 42 BM-21 “Grad” systems. The army consisted of three motorized rifle brigades armed with tanks and armored vehicles. The Abkhazian air force had 1 MiG-23 fighter, 2 Su-25 attack aircrafts and 3 L-39 training aircrafts, which had also been configured for attacks against ground targets. For transportation, there were two light transport planes and 4 Mi-8 helicopters. The air defense forces were armed with one medium range surface-to-air missile system as well as different self-propelled and portable short-range surface-to-air missiles. The Abkhazian navy was quite well armed for a small state, possessing 15 missile and artillery craft and a 350 strong naval infantry battalion.

The CIS peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia mostly consisted of a battalion from the Russian 19th MRD reinforced with approximately 100 fighters from the Chechen Vostok Battalion.⁷⁷

4.4. Russian 58th Army

The 58th Army formed the nucleus of the Russian North Caucasus Military District. The Army consisted of two MRDs, 1 independent MRR, 5 independent MRBs (including two newly established Mountain Brigades), a surface-to-surface missile brigade and all artillery, air defense, combat engineer, reconnaissance, communications, helicopter and logistics units prescribed by the Army’s table of organization (TO). The 42nd Guard MRD, which was fully manned with contract soldiers, was stationed in Chechnya and had two of the famous Chechen battalions Vostok and Zapad in its formation. The 19th MRD, which was partially manned with conscripts, was stationed in North Ossetia. According to Russian data, as of August 2008, the 58th Army had approximately 70,000 troops. The Army was equipped with 609 tanks, over 2000 IFVs and APCs, 125 different artillery pieces, 190 BM-21 “Grad” launchers and 450 air defense systems. Air support was provided by the Russian 4th Air and Air Defense Army with over 300 combat aircraft. The 4th Air and Air Defense Army consisted of 3 fighter air regiments of Su-27s located in a fighter base in Armenia, 3 attack air regiments of Su-25s, two bomber regiments of Su-24s, an aerial reconnaissance regiment, and 3 heli-

⁷⁷ Джадан, И. 2008. Пятидневная война. Россия принуждает к миру. Москва. Издательство Европа, с. 16–18. [Hereinafter *Джадан 2008*]

copter regiments.⁷⁸ The newly formed 33rd and 34th Mountain Brigades directly under the 58th Army's commander were also ready to support the Army's operational activities.

The main problem of the 58th Army was its outdated armament and equipment originating from the 1960s and 1970s, including the communications, reconnaissance, surveillance and fire control equipment. The equipment for night combat and friendly unit positioning was almost non-existent.

For the upcoming Georgian operation, the operational command of the Russian forces was assigned to the commander of the North Caucasus MD and its headquarters who would command two battle groups. The 58th Army with air assault and Spetsnaz reinforcements under the command of Lieutenant General Anatoli Khrulev was to commence an offensive in South Ossetia and then be prepared to continue it in Georgia towards Tbilisi.

General Khrulev later described the preparations for the invasion of Georgia as follows:

For me, the war began when I was in my office. On August 7th, the MD commander Colonel General Sergey Afanasyevich Makarov arrived at the Army's headquarters with a group of officers from the MD headquarters. Two days earlier, he had approved the 58th Army commander's decision to reinforce the Russian military contingent of the peacekeeping forces in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict region. This plan had been prepared to deal with the threat of emerging combat activities.⁷⁹

This citation contains interesting information. Ordinarily, the Russian field army's headquarters prepare a campaign plan based on the MD commander's operational order. Moscow has claimed that the Russian intervention in Georgia was a response to the latter's aggression towards South Ossetia, and was unexpected. However, Khrulev's explanation means that he as the commander of the 58th Army had already received the order from the MD commander, as well as an approved plan for the invasion of Georgia by August 5th, which was a clear and direct violation of the Sochi Agreement and international law. Georgia was a sovereign country and South Ossetia was *de jure* a part of it, as recognized by Russia. In this case, we can characterize such a Russian offensive as an act of aggression, which would enable the victim state to employ all available measures at its disposal, according to Chapter V of the UN Treaty.

⁷⁸ **The Tanks of August**, pp. 40–41.

⁷⁹ **Российско-Грузинский конфликт**. 08.08.2008.

<<http://doctormike10.livejournal.com/8539.html>>, (17.08.2013).

Part V: The Five-day War and its Lessons

While the Georgian government and armed forces leadership were crafting the operational plan called “Clean Field”, which would be the foundation of the reunification of South Ossetia with Georgia, they were convinced that Russia would not intervene in the conflict. The Russians had been skillfully claiming just that to president Shaakashvili, the Georgian government and military leadership throughout the entire spring and summer of 2008. Moscow’s deceptive message was simple: we will not give away Abkhazia that easily but South Ossetia is a burden for us to bear, and you can have it if you want it. This message was extremely successful and deceived Georgia’s political and military leadership completely.

Tbilisi has claimed that the Georgian military operation in South Ossetia was prepared by, and commanded by the Joint Staff. It had been built upon the complete assurance that no third party would get involved. It also employed the most combat ready military and MoI units. The exact contents of the plan have not yet been published and the Georgians have been quite terse in their descriptions of it. Based on captured Georgian operational charts, the Russians claim that the plan envisioned two primary offensives in separate directions: a short direct assault launched from Georgian territory towards Tskhinvali, and a wider indirect assault in the general direction of the strategically important Java village, which would then have allowed access to the Roki tunnel. According to this version, the Georgian Army allegedly planned to conquer nearly half of the self-declared republic’s territory (including the capital, Tskhinvali) and reach Java on the first day of the war. The plan anticipated that the Georgian units would reach the Roki tunnel and block it, as well as the Trans-Caucasian highway, and thus cut off the last South Ossetian strongpoints from Russian assistance. On the third day, the completion of the clearance of separatist resistance pockets in the self-declared republic was planned.⁸⁰ The Georgian leadership would then issue a declaration that Georgia had restored control over the separatist territory and appoint a new administration to the region. Thus, the entire operation was to have been completed within three to four days.

The Russian independent analyst Anton Lavrov, however, offers a different description of the Georgian operational plan.⁸¹ He claims that the

⁸⁰ Джадан 2008, с. 38–40.

⁸¹ Lavrov, A. 2010. Timelines of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008. – The Tanks of August, pp. 37–75.

Georgian offensive was to proceed in three primary directions. The task force established for the reunification of South Ossetia was organized and assigned in the following manner. On the right, the 3rd Infantry Brigade was to initiate the offensive east of Tskhinvali with the principal task of conquering the prominent Prisi Heights east of the city, and the Ossetian villages of Dmenis and Sarabuk in order to block Tskhinvali from the east. The intent was to push the defending forces back to the city in order to force them to surrender or to destroy them. On the left, the principal task of the 4th Infantry Brigade (led by Major Giorgi Kalandadze who had recently graduated from the Baltic Defense College) was to capture the large Ossetian village of Khetagurovo along with the heights and villages west of Tskhinvali in order to block the capital from southwest and west. The 4th Brigade was then to seize Tskhinvali from the west and together with the 3rd Brigade, conquer the village of Gufta north of Tskhinvali, and thus complete the encirclement of the capital. The follow-up task of the brigades was to move quickly along the Trans-Caucasian Highway to the north, towards the village of Java and the Roki tunnel. The mission was to seize the village, and then close the tunnel in order to prevent the adversary from sending assistance forces to South Ossetia. It should be noted that both brigades were short of officers and NCOs, and were partially manned with conscripts, instead of contract soldiers.

An *ad hoc* task unit composed of Georgian MoI Special Forces, a tank battalion, and a light infantry battalion was also established between the formations of the two brigades. This unit's mission was to conquer Tskhinvali by direct assault from the south, and clear the city of the adversary's units. It was to be supported by the brigades located in the east and west. Artillery support was to be provided by the artillery battalion of the 1st Infantry Brigade in Gori, which was equipped with 122 mm D-30 howitzers. The MoD's 500 men strong SOF Brigade was to conduct a covert maneuver north of Tskhinvali and seize the villages of Kemulta and Java. The SOF Brigade was also assigned a follow-up task of continuing the offensive towards the Roki tunnel and then, if possible, closing it. Other battalion-sized units composed of MoI and military troops in Western Georgia were tasked with attacking various military targets in the vicinities of Leninogorsk and Znauri, and conquering the village of Kvaisa in order to enable the continuation of the offensive towards the Roki tunnel and the blockade of the Trans-Caucasian Highway.⁸² The government decided that the Georgian units must avoid armed contacts with the Russian and North Ossetian peacekeepers in South

⁸² **The Tanks of August**, pp. 42–43.

Ossetia. The course of the war showed that the Georgians used exactly the operational plan described above.

The task of the Artillery Brigade was to provide general fire support to the centers of gravity, and to engage the enemy's artillery units. For such missions, the Brigade was to be largely independent. The assignment of the SOF units was particularly characteristic of the operational planning of the Georgian Joint Staff. The SOF was trained for reconnaissance, diversionary activities and unconventional warfare. They had never done cooperative exercises with tanks, IFVs and artillery, but yet they were assigned to undertake infantry tasks in an urban environment. Another oddity was the establishment of a very small reserve force for the entire task force. The reserve was based on the 53rd light infantry battalion of the 5th Infantry Brigade still being formed in Khoni, Western Georgia. The battalion had completed basic troop training but had not been trained for combat as a unit. One should recall Napoleon Bonaparte who had stated already in the 19th century that a leader going into combat without a sufficient reserve had already lost the battle. A strong reserve would have enabled a flexible response to sudden changes in the battlefield, but in an unclear operational situation where the involvement of the Russian forces was an unknown until the very last moment, the lack of a strong reserve would rather doom the entire operation. This is exactly what happened later.

The presumption of the Georgian Joint Staff, based on past experience, was that the Russian Air Force would attack mainly from the West, meaning from Abkhazia. This is why most of the modern air defense capabilities such as the Buk, and the OSA-AK/AKM systems bought from Ukraine, as well as the Rafael air defense system from Israel, were located in Western Georgia at the beginning of the conflict. The Artillery Brigade was relatively well defended from air threats. Since the Georgians assumed that Russian forces would not get involved in South Ossetia, they did not plan for a complete air defense system to protect the ground units. Thus, the only air defense weapons for the ground units were MANPADS, and 23 mm anti-aircraft guns.

Since the South Ossetian operation was planned to last for only 3–4 days, the Georgians did not pay sufficient attention to the requirements of supplying the forces, and establishing a logistics system. Apparently, the prevailing thought was that the units would be able to manage with their organic supplies (see Figure 4).

Information regarding the command and control of the operation is confusing at best. The Georgians have been extremely tight-lipped about

this as well. Presumably, there are things to be ashamed of. The testimony of the then Interior Minister confirmed that cooperation and coordination among the forces was a serious problem. Georgian officers have stated that the first phase of the operation was led by the Commander of the Army, who was a deputy of the Commander of the Joint Staff. Later, the operation was led by the Commander of the Joint Staff himself, Brigadier General Zaza Gogava. It is likely that the Minister of Defense, as well as his deputies, became involved in leading the operation as well. The Russians confirm with amazement that during combat, in addition to the commanders of the brigades, the two Deputy Defense Ministers were also involved in leading the brigades. The Deputy Interior Minister was directly involved with commanding the MoI forces.⁸³ This is reminiscent of the situation in the Russian Civil War in 1918-1920 when the Red Army units were led simultaneously, both by their commanders as well as their political commissars.

Such an arrangement is the most probable explanation as to why the command and control of the Georgian units faltered and was lost so quickly: at the operational level on the second day, at the battalion level, on the third day. The Georgians had violated the most fundamental and ironclad leadership rule of the battlefield, the unity of command, wherein a commander singlehandedly commands the unit and is responsible for fulfilling the combat mission. As the military strategic command element, it was the responsibility of the Georgian Joint Staff to plan and prepare for the defense of Georgia as a whole. It appears that they failed in their preparation and execution of the military campaign due to the sheer number of tasks that they faced, as well as due to their organizational inefficiency, and the inadequate operational planning skills of the officers. In order to lead the South Ossetian operation, a separate operational level staff should have been formed and then assigned the mission of coordinating the activities of the brigades, support units, and MoI units. The Joint Staff could then have provided general support to the operation, monitored the situation on the borders, as well as in Georgia, and reacted appropriately if necessary. The Joint Staff could then have also led the defensive efforts on the Abkhazian frontier where the politicians as well as military leadership were not paying attention.

The Georgian plan had other shortcomings as well, one of which was related to military aims. The first phase of the operation prescribed the encirclement of the South Ossetian capital. In addition to the South Ossetian armed formations, Russian and North Ossetian forces (which included

⁸³ Шени 2009, с. 79.

Russian troops) would also have been surrounded in the city. While analyzing the potential changes over the course of the battle, the Georgian Joint Staff surely had to presume that the Russians would use the need to rescue the “peacekeepers” as an excuse for an offensive, and would definitely come to the aid of their fellow troops. To do so, there was only one possible route from the north. This was through the Roki tunnel. The Georgians needed to make this their top priority and certainly close it as soon as possible. This became impossible later, after the Russians took control of the tunnel. Thus, if the Georgians had been able to keep the tunnel closed for even one or two days, the results of operation “Clear Field” would have been quite different.

At the same time, the course of the conflict showed that the Georgians never contested the Roki tunnel and the road for the Russian forces’ entry to Georgia remained open. Several experts suspect that the goal of Tbilisi’s operation was not so much to conquer the Ossetians, but rather to push them back to Russia through the Roki tunnel. This is why there were no attempts to close the tunnel.⁸⁴ This version is somewhat verified by information from Georgian sources confirming that the Joint Staff did plan to seize the Roki tunnel during the first phase of the offensive and did initiate a special operation with SOF units that engaged the Russian forces defending the tunnel. The operation was, however, stopped by Georgia’s political leadership. Thus, the reason for planning the encirclement of Tskhinvali remains a mystery.

According to the NATO assessment team that visited Georgia in September 2008, the operation had not been planned as a joint operation, but rather as an Army one. The Air Force was minimally involved and had near zero efficiency. The Joint Staff completely neglected to assign combat tasks to the Navy, which resulted in the loss of almost the entire fleet at Poti.

The Georgian task force that was assembled against South Ossetia by August 8th, 2008, numbered approximately 12,000 troops and 75 tanks. This included about 4000 troops of MoI units as well as 70 Cobra type light armored vehicles. The only unit not employed before the outbreak of the conflict was the 2nd Infantry Brigade, which was in peacetime status at its base in Senaki near the Abkhazian border. The mission of this brigade was to defend Western Georgia, should the Abkhazians or the Russians open a western front.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Джадан 2008, с. 66.

⁸⁵ **The Tanks of August**, p. 47.

At the last minute before the commencement of operations, the Georgian Joint Staff realized that their task force lacked an efficient reserve. As there were no other units available except the 2nd Brigade, the Joint Staff decided on the night of August 7th, to redeploy it to the vicinity of Tskhinvali. All other more or less combat capable units of the 5th Infantry Brigade and MoI units in Western Georgia had already received their orders to defend the Georgian-inhabited Kodori Valley in Upper Abkhazia, and were already posted there. These ill-considered decisions made by the Joint Staff left the entire western part of Georgia completely without military defense capabilities. The Russian forces soon took advantage of this by conducting a raid from Abkhazia to Senaki and Poti, crushing the Georgian military infrastructure, destroying the fleet and collecting abundant armament and equipment without any resistance.

The following section presents a chronological overview of the war.

5.1. August 7th – the Night Before the War

Russian sources claim that the Georgian units stationed at their permanent bases received the order to raise their combat readiness level on the evening of August 6th. Subsequently, the staffs of the 3rd and 4th Brigade issued combat orders to their respective units, describing the order of departure and assembly at the South Ossetian border, as well as the aims and individual unit tasks for the upcoming offensive. At 0100, the Georgian Joint Staff decided to commence a partial mobilization.⁸⁶ On the morning of the 7th, the Russian chief negotiator in South Ossetia, Yuri Popov told the Georgians that the bilateral negotiations between Georgian and South Ossetian authorities would take place that same day in Tskhinvali. However, when the Georgian Reintegration Minister Temuri Yakobashvili arrived at the place of negotiations, neither Popov, nor the South Ossetian representatives were there. Popov later attributed his absence to his car having broken down during the ride to Tskhinvali. The Georgian Minister finally succeeded in meeting with the commander of Russian peacekeepers General Kulakhmetov, who stated that Russia had lost control over the events and suggested that Georgia

⁸⁶ Лавров, А. 2009. Хронология боевых действий между Россией и Грузией в августе 2008 года. – Барабанов, Михаил; Лавров, Антон; Целуйко, Вячеслав 2009. Танки августа. Сборник статей. Центр анализа стратегий и технологий. Москва, с. 53. [Hereinafter *Лавров 2009*]

declare a unilateral ceasefire, which would allow Russia to reduce tensions in the conflict region.⁸⁷

The implications of the proposal meant that Georgia should officially permit the entrance of Russian forces to South Ossetia i.e. Georgian territory. At that time, Russian units were already in the Java region, south of the Roki tunnel. Moscow has denied it, but there are several facts that confirm it. Georgian intelligence managed to intercept a phone call at 0300 on August 7th between a South Ossetian border guard named Gassiyev and his commander in Tskhinvali. Gassiyev reported that a convoy of Russian tanks and armored vehicles under the command of Colonel Khromchenko had entered the Roki tunnel. Gassiyev asked for guidance for further actions. After talks with his leadership in Tskhinvali, the border guard's commander ordered Gassiyev to "give the colonel complete freedom of action".⁸⁸

The arrival of Russian units in South Ossetia already on August 7th, which is *de jure* Georgian territory, has been confirmed by Russian officers. In an interview with the Russian MoD newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Captain Denis Sedristyi stated the following:

*On August 7th, we received the order to start moving towards Tskhinvali. An alert was declared and we began the road march. We arrived and set up bivouac [apparently in the Java region – A.L.] but there were explosions on August 8th, which caused many of us to become confused. That morning, we held a meeting and each company was given an assignment. By 1000 we had started moving towards Tskhinvali.*⁸⁹

The Russian MoD announced later that the Captain had gotten his dates mixed up.

As a decoy for the movement of Russian forces, the Chairman of the South Ossetian Security Council, Russian Colonel Anatoli Barankevich announced to the press on August 7th that the North Ossetian forces were moving to South Ossetia to aid their brethren. This was a blatant lie because

⁸⁷ **Cornell, S. E.; Popjanevski, J.; Nilsson, N.** 2008. Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the World. POLICY PAPER, August 2008. Central Asia – Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, p. 13. <<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0808Georgia-PP.pdf>>, (18.08.2013). [Hereinafter *Cornell, Popjanevski, Nilsson 2008*]

⁸⁸ **Россия и Грузия козырнули картами** 2009. – Коммерсантъ Nr. 143 (4198), 07.08.2009. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1216705>>, (20.08.2013). [Hereinafter *Россия и Грузия 2009*]

⁸⁹ **Вооруженный конфликт в Южной Осетии.** <http://works.doklad.ru/view/15gSwp5_xa8/2.html>, (20.08.2013).

North Ossetia as part of the Russian Federation, could not possess any independent forces. The following fact confirms the participation of Russian artillery in the bombardment of Georgian villages before the beginning of the conflict and the lack of neutrality on behalf of the Russian “peacekeepers”. The Russian Army Lieutenant Oleg Golovanov directed Russian artillery fire on the Georgian villages from an observation post situated on the roof of the building of the so-called Russian “peacekeeping” battalion.⁹⁰ By nightfall, the Georgian villages of Nuli and Avnevi, in the Liakhvi enclave had been completely destroyed by Russian and Ossetian artillery and mortar fire.

On the afternoon of August 7th, the National Defense Council of the Georgian Parliament made the political decision to begin military operations in South Ossetia. The situation in Tbilisi gradually became graver. The Georgian President consulted with Western diplomats and asked for guidance. The US Deputy Secretary of State Matthew Bryza advised him not to fall into a trap and avoid direct confrontation with Russia. Shaakashvili took this advice and issued the declaration of a unilateral ceasefire at 1900, and invited the South Ossetian authorities to negotiations. Appearing live on Georgian television, the president announced his agreement to negotiations in any form and proposed that Russia be the guarantor of maximum autonomy for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. There were no responses to either proposal. Several hours later, the Ossetians opened fire with heavy weapons on the Georgian villages of Avnevi, Prisi and Kurta. Moscow, who had already prepared the forces for the Georgian invasion, as well as their marionettes in South Ossetia, did not need a truce.

At approximately 2300, Georgian intelligence informed the president that Russian forces were entering Georgian territory, as a Russian convoy of over 100 vehicles passed through the Roki tunnel and was moving into South Ossetia.⁹¹ Why the Georgian intelligence was so late in reporting the information regarding the entrance of Russian forces to South Ossetia when it had already been received in the morning is incomprehensible. The Russian MoD naturally denies this fact by claiming that their forces entered South Ossetia in the morning of August 8th. According to international law, such unsanctioned movement of Russian forces into another sovereign state’s territory was essentially an act of aggression to which Georgia had the right to react using any means at its disposal, including armed force.

⁹⁰ **Хроники Августа**. Часть 2. Запрещённый фильм в России. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OwSYnHZq2g>>, (20.08.2013) [Hereinafter *Хроники Августа*]

⁹¹ **Cornell, Popjanevski, Nilsson** 2008, p. 14.

In this tense situation, President Shaakashvili, to a certain extent, lost his head and made a fatal mistake for Georgia. A military confrontation with overwhelming Russian forces that possessed abundant reserves was hopeless. The establishment of defensive positions along the South Ossetian border would have demonstrated to the world who the real aggressor was. Instead of enacting this, Shaakashvili decided in favor of a suicidal offensive. The president gave the following order to the Georgian armed forces:

The mission of the task force is to conduct an operation in order to destroy enemy forces with accurate strikes, provide security for the peaceful citizens, crush the enemy completely within 72 hours and impose Georgian jurisdiction over the territory.⁹²

Shortly before midnight, the Georgian MoD announced to the Georgian public that the decision to restore Georgian constitutional order in South Ossetia by military means had been made. At 2335 hours, Georgian artillery commenced firing at South Ossetian defensive positions and strongpoints in Tskhinvali and in its vicinity. The purpose was to destroy known South Ossetian military targets and demoralize their fighters. 10 minutes later, there was a phone call between the commander of South Ossetian peacekeeping force, Major General Kulakhmetov and the Georgian Joint Staff commander of peace operations, Brigadier General Mamuka Kurashvili. General Kurashvili announced that the Georgian forces had initiated an operation to restore Georgian constitutional order in South Ossetia and promised security guarantees to Russian peacekeepers if they remained neutral and refrained from involving themselves in the events.⁹³ Kulakhmetov, however, had different orders from Moscow: to open fire on the Georgians when they entered South Ossetia.

5.2. August 8th – the First Day of the War

The Georgian artillery brigade's fire was directed at South Ossetian military targets in Tskhinvali and its vicinity. Due to inaccuracies of forward observers, but mostly as a result of the rocket artillery's dispersion, several shells landed away from their targets, causing damage to residences, as well as to government buildings. The Russians used this in their overwhelming propaganda, and accused the Georgians of wishing to destroy the South Ossetian capital.

⁹² **Россия и Грузия** 2009.

⁹³ **The Tanks of August**, p. 48.

This claim, however, was completely illogical. Why would the Georgians wish to deliberately destroy the city and the territory they wanted to reunite to their state? The photos and videos of journalists who were in the city that day clearly demonstrate that the city was intact. Following Tbilisi's orders, Georgian artillerymen avoided firing at the Russian peacekeeping base in the city, and at the Russian checkpoints in the vicinity of Tskhinvali.

At 0040, the Georgian 4th Brigade's artillery battalion commenced preparatory fire against targets in the vicinity of the tactically important village of Khetagurovo located west of Tskhinvali. 20 minutes later, the brigade's 41st and 42nd light infantry battalions commenced their assault. The village was taken quickly as the defending Ossetian units withdrew, and the Georgians continued to slowly move north on rugged terrain. The leadership of the task force ordered the 43rd battalion, which formed the brigade's reserve, to turn west and seize the Znauri region inhabited by the Ossetians. Tactically, this decision is difficult to comprehend as the main force of the brigade conducting the offensive was then left without the vital reserve.

According to Moscow's official information, Russian Defense Minister Anatoli Serdyukov called President Medvedev at around 0100 and reported that the Georgians had initiated combat activities in Southern Ossetia. It is after this event that Medvedev allegedly issued the order for the Russian forces to enter Georgian territory. At 0300, the units of the 19th MRD in North Ossetia and the 42nd MRD in Chechnya received the combat alert and were issued combat orders to begin a road march and enter South Ossetia. At the same time, a battalion tactical group from the 76th AAD in Pskov, which had just returned from a field exercise, received an air tasking order to North Ossetia. The entire Russian military machine, which had been well trained during the *Kavkaz-2008* exercise, began to quickly mobilize.

The Russian MoD has called the Georgian invasion a peace enforcement operation. There are two different kinds of peace operations. The first does not involve the use of armed force and is based on economic, legal and financial sanctions. The second involves the use of armed force and operates under the auspices of the UN, regional security organizations, or coalitions of the willing. Such operations are permitted only under the UN Security Council mandate, according to Chapter VII of the UN Charter.⁹⁴ The UN Security Council meeting on August 8th gave no such mandate to Moscow.

⁹⁴ **Operatins Other Than War.** Volume IV: Peace Operations. Chapter III: Peace Enforcement. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call_93-8_chap3.htm>, (22.08.2013).

After the war, President Medvedev's opponents accused him of indecisiveness and being slow to issue the orders for the Russian armed forces to intervene in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian experts, on the other hand, confirm that the delays were deliberate and part of the war plan. The goal was for Georgia to get tied down with combat, and show them as the aggressor, and thus justify the subsequent Russian violence in the eyes of the world and the Russian people.⁹⁵ The then Prime Minister, but de facto leader of Russia at the time, Vladimir Putin admitted in 2012 that he knew about the "potential Georgian aggression" three days before, and had been informed of the situation in South Ossetia on August 5th and 6th.⁹⁶

According to Moscow's information, the two Russian battalion combat teams that were in the assembly area north of the Roki tunnel entered South Ossetia at 0200 on August 8th, and began moving towards Java. However, it is likely that these were the same battalions that had already illegally entered the Georgian territory on August 7th, and were hiding in the mountains south of the Roki tunnel. These two battalions acted as an advance party to guarantee unhindered entry for the following Russian main body of forces to the conflict region. When they reached Java in the morning, they did not stop, but instead continued their movement towards Tskhinvali. The Russian MoD has claimed that the battalions were sent to rescue the Russian "peacekeepers" that were surrounded in Tskhinvali. The following events, however, lead to another conclusion. It seems that the main mission of the Russian forces was to seize the Georgian villages between Java and Tskhinvali, and block the Trans-Caucasian highway as well as the western bypass of the Liakhvi corridor known as the Zarski road, and thereby prevent the Georgian forces from moving towards Java and the Roki tunnel.

In the first hours of August 8th, the Georgian Joint Staff issued the order for the 2nd Brigade in Senaki, Western Georgia to conduct a movement to the conflict region. The border between Georgia and Abkhazia was left undefended.

At around 0300, the Georgian government declared a full mobilization. The first groups of reservists started to arrive at the collection points at 0500. They were bused to military bases and issued small arms and ammunition. According to Georgian MoD data, approximately 15,000 reservists were mobilized. Due to the fact that the reserve lacked a unit-based structure and the necessary equipment, it was difficult to assign them any significant role. The

⁹⁵ Джадан 2008, с. 51.

⁹⁶ Путин рассказал о подготовке 2012.

most acute problem was the almost complete lack of competent reserve unit leadership. The Georgian forces tried to establish *ad hoc* units from the mass of reservists but as these units lacked leadership, unit training, and sufficient armament, and equipment, they were of no significant military value. Apparently, the Joint Staff and the lower level headquarters lacked a mobilization plan. This was further compounded by a lack of mobilization-related training of the reserve. The Georgian military also lacked the necessary unit-based mobilization depots and wartime unit formation centers, which are vital for a fast and organized execution of the mobilization. The course of the conflict showed that the efficiency of the Georgian reserve was close to zero.

After several hours of artillery fire, the main body of the Georgian task force started their advance towards Tskhinvali and entered South Ossetian territory. The first units supported by tanks reached the Tskhinvali city limits by 0400. It should be noted here that there was a great deal of confusion within the ranks of the task force, as it was comprised of units of different training levels from different ministries. Communications between the units did not function, as the task force seemed to have lacked a unified communications plan. The combat orders given to the unit commanders were ambiguous and the direction to send the troops in, and their ultimate destination, were unknown. This indicates that either there was no detailed and previously MAPEX-rehearsed plan for the seizure of Tskhinvali, or the unit commanders had not been sufficiently briefed during the preparation phase. The units piled up at the city limits and became congested in the streets. This enabled the South Ossetian artillery to direct relatively accurate fire at them. Confusion erupted within the task force, and it was forced to withdraw.

At 0500, after order in the units and in communications was restored, the offensive was renewed. But, the capital proved to be more difficult to conquer than the Georgians had expected. They encountered resistance from the South Ossetian armed formations, as well as from the Russian “peacekeepers”, and the North Ossetian “Alania” peacekeeping battalion of approximately 1500 fighters, that were already occupying the access roads. The defenders of the city, however, had no central command and communication. Urban warfare ensued, and the defense fragmented into multiple separate clashes.

At dawn, the Georgian SOF began an assault from the western border of South Ossetia on Kvaisa, the largest Ossetian village in the area. They withdrew with several wounded troops after meeting well-organized resistance. The SOF did not pursue any further attacks, and the two sides exchanged only sporadic fire. Apparently, confusing orders from Tbilisi about whether

to halt or continue the assault on the Roki tunnel was the main reason for the inactivity of the SOF.

At 0600, the 3rd Brigade initiated an offensive against the Ossetian village of Dmenis on the right side of the task force. The secondary mission of the brigade was to seize the Prisi Heights east of Tskhinvali. The brigade soon met with heavy resistance from the skillfully placed Ossetian defensive positions in the heights, which considerably slowed the offensive. At the same time, the first armed clashes were occurring between the Georgian SOF and the Russian “peacekeepers” at the center of the front. When the center of the Georgian task force tried to enter Tskhinvali from the south, it encountered a reinforced Russian contingent of approximately 220 troops. The rest of the Russian “peacekeeping” forces, or approximately 250 troops, were scattered in defensive positions and observation posts throughout the capital. When they detected the Georgian forces, the Russians opened fire with small arms as well as BMP-1 IFV-s. The Georgian SOF called in tanks to assist. One Russian IFV was destroyed and five “peacekeepers” were killed. The Georgian forces surrounded the Russian base camp, but made no direct attempts to attack it.

In the morning, four Georgian Su-25 attack aircraft conducted their first combat mission to destroy the strategically important Gufti bridge on the Trans-Caucasian highway. The Russians claim that the mission was unsuccessful as no bombs hit the target. The Georgians claim that the bridge was hit. In any event, the movement of Russian convoys was not significantly hindered. The appearance of Georgian jets and the bomb strikes were a surprise for the Russian forces moving along the highway. They immediately informed their HQ of the attacks. The Georgian jets managed to bomb a few Ossetian military objects including a military base in Java and the vehicle park of the Alania battalion, but the Russian jets soon appeared as well. After assessing the air situation, the Georgian Joint Staff decided to abort the undefended jet missions and to disperse and hide them at multiple airfields. Georgian aircraft flew no more combat missions. In reality, the relatively small aerial bomb supply of the Georgians ran out on the first day of the war.

At 0800, Georgia opened another front in the western part of South Ossetia. A Mountain Battalion along with a police special unit began an offensive towards the Perevi District. Thus, the Georgian Armed forces had begun offensives in seven different locations, dispersing their scarce forces over a relatively wide area (see Figure 5).

In the first half of the day of August 8th there was intense combat in Tskhinvali. At 1000, the Georgian government announced that 1,500 task

force troops had entered the South Ossetian capital and taken control of its key areas. But soon, the Georgians became bogged down by the Russian and Ossetian defense. After battle commenced between the Georgians and the Russian and North Ossetian “peacekeepers”, it became obvious that the task force assembled for the capture of Tskhinvali was too weak for such a complicated task. The MoI Special Forces troops, despite being highly motivated, were not prepared for conventional urban combat involving dozens of small clashes. The lack of skills in directing artillery and the limited ability to cooperate with tanks became apparent among the attacking units. As the units fighting in the city had no forward observers, the fire support provided by the artillery and mortars for the infantry was often inaccurate and ineffective, and hindered the completion of the mission.

The use of tanks during an urban offensive is also antithetical to the common rules of general purpose force tactics. Numerous wars in the past century, including the unsuccessful Russian invasion of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya in December 1994 where Chechen fighters destroyed a whole motorized rifle brigade, have confirmed the principle that tanks should be used in urban warfare only in extreme cases, and are mostly for infantry support. An independent tank in urban combat is quite helpless, as its capabilities for observation, maneuver and weapons employment are limited in urban environment. This is why tanks always move through the streets behind and under the protection of the infantry, and provide them with machine gun and main gun fire support.

A TV reporter named Maksim Shevchenko who was in Tskhinvali during the first days of the war described the Georgian troops in urban combat as follows:

The Georgian army has low morale and fighting capabilities. They cannot handle close quarters battle with the adversary. The infantry moves behind and in the shadow of the tanks and retreats immediately when the tank is hit, often abandoning it and their comrades to die inside.”⁹⁷

This could be considered to be Russian propaganda, but it was also the opinion of the volunteers of the Western Ukrainian national organization UNA-UNSO. The UNA-UNSO volunteers also noted that Georgian soldiers were extremely sensitive to casualties, they panicked easily, and they lacked

⁹⁷ Джадан 2008, с. 40.

the persistence to complete combat tasks.⁹⁸ In the first few hours of battle, Georgia lost four tanks on the streets of Tskhinvali.

Due to the problems encountered in Tskhinvali, the Georgian task force command changed the mission of the 4th Brigade in the west, and ordered its main forces to assist the central group of forces. This meant that the whole operation plan changed significantly on the first day of combat, and made success much less feasible. The existence of a strong reserve would have made a great difference, as it could have reinforced the SOF troops in the city. The 4th Brigade, after abandoning the just conquered village of Khetagurovo, turned east and entered Tskhinvali from the southwest. Soldiers and SOF troops moved along the main streets slowly, taking house after house. At 1430, Tbilisi announced that the Georgians had taken control of 70% of Tskhinvali, and the battles were occurring in the downtown area. The Russians, however, argue that by noon the Georgian units controlled only 30% of the city territory.⁹⁹

The offensive on the right side of the Georgian task force advanced more slowly than planned. Units of the 3rd Brigade did conquer part of the Prisi Heights but were forced to stop in front of the well-fortified Ossetian defenses, and were soon hit by air attacks from the Russian Air Force.

Shortly before noon, the Mayor of Tbilisi, Gigi Ugulava announced (it remains a mystery why the mayor did this, instead of a government representative) that Georgia would institute a cease-fire from 1500 to 1800, which would enable the peaceful inhabitants of Tskhinvali to pass safely to Georgian territory. At 1500, firing stopped in Tskhinvali.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, the Russian Air Force commenced bombing Georgian units, as well as different targets across the whole territory of Georgia. The Air Force bases around Tbilisi and the Army bases at Vaziani, Marneuli and Bolnisi, as well as the Independent Tank Battalion base in Gori were bombed.

In the afternoon, South Ossetian authorities announced that Russian armored units were approaching Tskhinvali. The Russian MoD remained silent on this matter but announced that 10 Russian “peacekeepers” had been killed and over 30 wounded. At 1745, the Georgian Reintegration Minister Temuri Jakobashvili announced that Georgian units had taken complete

⁹⁸ *Хроники Августа*.

⁹⁹ *The Tanks of August*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁰ *Пятидневная война 2008*. – Коммерсантъ, журнал «Власть» номер 32 (785), 18.08.2008. с. 8–9. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1011909>>, (22.08.2013). [Hereinafter *Пятидневная война 2008*]

control of Tskhinvali. The Russian MoD announced that units of the 58th Army were nearing the city.¹⁰¹ Soon, the first clashes commenced between Georgian and arriving Russian units.

The appearance of Russian aircraft and forces on the battlefield was unexpected, and stunned the Georgian troops. They had not been informed of such a possibility. The prospect of facing a large state's military induced a feeling of inferiority in the troops of the small state. The biggest shock for Georgian units came from the Russian Air Force attack on the 4th Brigade's 42nd Infantry Battalion that was conducting the offensive in western Tskhinvali. The Russians used cluster munitions during the attack. Over 20 Georgian troops were killed and even more wounded. The Georgian battalion panicked and retreated, leaving behind scores of equipment and three T-72 tanks. The situation was made even worse as the Georgian troops themselves spread rumors of the "destruction of the 42nd Battalion", also via mobile phones.

Rumors of the involvement of the Russian forces in the battle, and the large-scale losses suffered by the Georgians quickly spread among the units fighting in Tskhinvali. This brought about a loss of morale and general confusion. The chaos was furthered by the appearance of the Russian 292nd Artillery Regiment, and an artillery battalion from the 693rd Artillery Regiment, which established their firing positions, then began opening fire on the Georgian units at 1500. Soon, a self-initiated general retreat of Georgian units commenced from the city. People present in Tskhinvali at that time claim that after 1600 there were no Georgian units in the city, just a few smaller groups of Georgian troops who had fallen behind.

Soon after the failure of the first assault on Tskhinvali, the offensive of the 3rd Brigade east of the city was also stopped as Russian artillery and aircraft attacked their positions. Units of the brigade were forced to withdraw to the area around the village of Eredvi. Upon learning of the failure of the assault on Tskhinvali and the approaching Russian forces, the Georgian army and police units in the Liakhvi corridor north of Tskhinvali left the area. Only the local territorial defense troops remained to defend the villages. There was general disorganization and confusion [in the area of operations – *Editor*]. By 2200, Tskhinvali was under complete Russian and Ossetian control. By nightfall, the only Georgian unit still fighting was the Artillery Brigade under the command of Major General Devi Chankotadze that had demonstrated its proficiency throughout the day and had suffered no significant losses. Compared to other units, these artillery batteries were much better trained

¹⁰¹ **Пятидневная война** 2008, с. 9.

and led. They changed their firing positions quickly and often, and remained beyond reach of the Russian Air Force and artillery.

In the evening, the Russian Air Force lost their first aircraft. According to the Russians, a Su-25BM was hit by friendly fire while flying over Russian units on the Zarski bypass when it was mistaken for a Georgian aircraft.¹⁰²

On the afternoon of August 8th, after their long march from Senaki, the units of the Georgian 2nd Brigade started arriving and assembling in the vicinity of the Takhtisdziri village on the South Ossetian border. The final units joined the brigade at 1800. The Brigade immediately received a combat mission and started preparations for a new offensive on the left side of the task force. Their objective was the village of Khetagurovo that had been abandoned during the day by the 4th Brigade after it had received a different mission.

Later that night, the Georgian Joint Staff decided that the assault on Tskhinvali would be renewed the following day. All artillery in the area was to support the assault.

A widespread cyber war commenced against Georgia on the very first day of the war. A constant barrage of cyberattacks against different Georgian web sites occurred throughout the day.¹⁰³ These were combined with Russian influence operations that were carried out in a well-planned and complex manner. For example, Georgian military members as well as their families would find demoralizing messages and receive threatening calls on their mobile phones. These influence activities were significantly facilitated by the fact that Russian companies were the main mobile phone service providers in Georgia.

August 8th was a quiet day on the Abkhazian frontier. After the 2nd Brigade had departed from Senaki, there were no larger Georgian units along the entire border between Abkhazia and Georgia. This allowed freedom of operations for the combined group of Russian-Abkhazian “Zapad” forces led by General V. Shamanov. The issue of the Georgian-controlled Kodori Valley that stretched into the eastern part of Abkhazia, but was populated by Georgians and Svans, was still unresolved. The Russians and the Abkhazians had already begun preparations for the invasion of the valley. The Russian MoD decided to reinforce their forces in Abkhazia with additional units. The 7th Guards Airborne Assault Division (Mountain) was tasked with sending three battalion combat teams to Abkhazia in an expedited manner with some

¹⁰²The Tanks of August, p. 55.

¹⁰³Cornell, Popjanevski, Nilsson 2008, p. 15.

being sent by sea. On the evening of August 8th, a battalion of the 108th Airborne Regiment from the 7th GAAD was loaded on the Russian Black Sea Fleet amphibious assault platforms and sent towards Abkhazia. A reinforced Naval Infantry battalion from Sevastopol was set to arrive at the port of Ochamchira on amphibious landing ships the next day.

5.3. August 9th – the Second Day of the War

On the second day of the war, the Georgian Parliament approved the declaration of a state of war for a duration of 15 days that had been submitted by President Shaakashvili.

At night, the Georgian artillery completed an hour-long preparatory fire mission so the ground forces could launch a second attempt to annex South Ossetia. However, when the artillery fire ended, an unexplained operational pause occurred. It was not until 0600 that the Georgian units launched their offensive from multiple directions. The 2nd Brigade's infantry units supported by tanks began the assault on Khetagurovo village that had been abandoned the previous day. The small Russian unit in the village withdrew after a short battle towards Tskhinvali and then joined the Russian peacekeepers in the city. The latter had been reinforced at night with a company from the Russian 10th Spetsnaz Brigade. This significantly increased the number of Russian "peacekeepers" holding the southern part of the defensive perimeter around Tskhinvali.

The 4th Brigade's independently operating 43rd Battalion was refitted by reservists and sought to continue their offensive in order to seize the Znauri region, as the operation had failed the previous day. The 3rd Brigade restarted their offensive east of Tskhinvali, and began moving towards the Ossetian villages of Dmenisi and Tlikana. The Georgian units were now operating in a much more cautious, and hesitant manner than had been the case the previous day. Despite the relatively small enemy unit, it still took the 2nd Brigade 6 hours to recapture the village of Khetagurovo. Small units were left behind to defend the conquered villages. In the center of the task force, a hasty process of reorganizing the forces was taking place south of Tskhinvali in order to begin the second attempt to seize the city. The 4th Brigade minus the 43rd Battalion was included in the central task group.

The second day of the war turned out to be a very dark one for the Russian Air Force as it lost four combat aircraft during the day. A fifth plane was shot down as well, but its origin still remains in question. Around 0900, a Russian

Tu-22M3 heavy bomber was hit by a Georgian SAM and crashed near the village of Karbauli approximately 50 km northwest of Gori. Two members of the four-man crew died, one was captured and one was lost. An hour later, a Russian Su-24M encountered a similar fate. One pilot died, the other was captured by the Georgians. At almost the same time, a Russian Su-25SM was hit by Ossetian friendly fire above Tskhinvali. The pilot ejected and was rescued. Later in the afternoon, two Russian Su-25BM aircraft took off from North Ossetia and headed towards Tskhinvali in order to provide close air support for their ground units, when they were suddenly attacked by Russian Mig-29s. One of the Su-25BMs was hit by an air-to-air missile and crashed. The pilot, Major Vladimir Edamenko died.

Between 1500 and 1600 there was another confusing incident with a fifth combat aircraft. A Su-25 was brought down by friendly fire after it was hit by a self-propelled ZSU-23-4 from a Russian air defense artillery group that was guarding the Gutri bridge. The plane ignited and crashed in the mountains. Official Russian channels reported it as a destroyed Georgian aircraft while Tbilisi denied that any of their aircraft were shot down. Russian journalists who visited the crash site later confirmed that it belonged to the Russian Air Force. Regardless, the unexpected and significant number of losses forced the Russian military leadership to sharply reduce the number of combat missions until the situation had stabilized.¹⁰⁴ A decision was made for the Russian Air Force to continue flying at higher altitudes. Due to the losses of tactical aircraft, the Tu-22M3 heavy bombers were mobilized and their bombs were directed towards the Kopitnari airfield near Khutaisi and on the city of Gori. This relative quiet in the airspace enabled the Georgian combat helicopters to conduct their first combat missions.

An interesting event occurred around noon at the Zarski bypass. The central group of Georgian forces had finished their preparations for the second attempt to take Tskhinvali and commenced their assault, but somehow Russian intelligence completely missed this. The commander of the Russian 58th Army, Lieutenant General Anatoli Khrulev decided to take advantage of the lull in fighting around Tskhinvali and send a motorized rifle battalion combat team to reinforce the garrison. At around 1400, the battalion started to move along the Zarski bypass towards Tskhinvali. The 58th Army's mobile command post joined the convoy, as General Khrulev wanted to move in front of his forces. He was reckless enough to ride in an unarmored vehicle. While the convoy was moving, Georgian artillery commenced their preparatory fire

¹⁰⁴The Tanks of August, pp. 101–102.

on the capital, and managed to hit General Khrulev's convoy, which suffered significant losses. After the evacuation of the wounded and killed, the convoy continued to move, trying to get to the Russian peacekeepers base as soon as possible. A few kilometers before the base, they encountered a Georgian reconnaissance company, which was unexpected for both sides. A short but intense firefight commenced with both sides taking losses. General Khrulev and the accompanying journalists were wounded and their driver killed.¹⁰⁵ The Georgian troops eventually withdrew and the Russian battalion reached the "peacekeepers" defending the southern camp.

Soon Georgian forces supported by tanks entered the southern suburbs of Tskhinvali and a fierce battle commenced. The Russians and Ossetians were forced to form a 360 degree defensive position and soon found themselves surrounded. A Russian Spetsnaz unit, and a company of Chechens from the Vostok Battalion were sent from Java to rescue them. All Russian artillery in the area was ordered to direct their fire on the Georgians attacking from the south. Russian tactical aircraft began to actively, and quite accurately bomb the attacking Georgian units. About 20 Georgian troops were killed and over 100 wounded. The Georgian command post of the 41st Light Infantry Battalion received a direct hit, and the battalion commander was killed. Under heavy bombardment, the Georgian assault stalled again, as close quarter battle with the Russians and Ossetians ensued. The 43rd light infantry battalion that has just seized the Znauri village west of Tskhinvali panicked under Russian artillery fire and abandoned the village. Another Georgian unit that had just crossed the western border of South Ossetia and was moving towards Perevi took a direct hit from Russian Tochka-U surface-to-surface (SSM) missiles armed with cluster munitions (according to the Georgians), near the village of Sinaguri that evening. The unit immediately withdrew back to Georgia and made no further attempts to enter South Ossetia.

The second attempt to conquer Tskhinvali and the separatist enclave as a whole did not provide the expected outcome. The Georgian forces began a general withdrawal after 1700.

Shortly before their first units reached Tskhinvali, Russian forces initiated their electronic warfare (EW) campaign. Georgian brigades began experiencing communications problems. The next day, Georgian radio communications were almost completely suppressed. The situation was further worsened by the fact that Georgian signal troops lacked the necessary training for such incidents, as well as alternative means of communications

¹⁰⁵ **The Tanks of August**, p. 61.

in the EW environment. The matter was further exacerbated by command and control related confusion. Thus, coordination between units was significantly hampered, and then lost in its entirety over the following days.

By nightfall, the Ossetian and Russian “peacekeeping” units, which had suffered significant losses, left Tskhinvali. This created a rather odd situation wherein the city was essentially abandoned by Russian as well as Georgian units. The only forces present were a Russian motorized infantry battalion, some small Spetsnaz groups, the Ossetian militia (law enforcement) and some remnants of the Ossetian armed groups. By the end of the day, Georgian forces had lost control of almost all of the territory that they had seized during the day. The only areas still controlled by Georgian units were the village of Khetagurovo and the access roads to the village of Tbeti, which were held by the 2nd Brigade units. By evening, the only forces fighting on both sides were the artillery units, which made for another rather curious situation. The Georgian forces had suffered major losses. Command and control of the Georgian units was in disarray, and there was no functioning supply system. The country’s western border was completely undefended and the Georgian military lacked any reserves to address this issue. The situation forced President Shaakashvili to ask the United States to redeploy the 2000 troops of the 1st Brigade in Iraq back to Georgia in an expedited manner. The US agreed and started to work on it immediately.

Events in Abkhazia on August 9th

On the night of August 9th, two Tochka-U missiles were launched from Abkhazia and hit the Georgian naval base in Poti. The Tochka battalion had secretly been deployed to Abkhazia already in the fall of 2007, and was stationed near the city of Ochamchira. One of the missiles exploded on the base, and the other at the shipping container terminal near the base. Five Georgian sailors were killed, and over 30 were wounded. The civilian side suffered similar losses. All Georgian naval vessels fit for sea, and manned with crews started making preparations for relocation to the port of Bathumi in the south. It is incomprehensible why such preparations had not been made earlier. Simultaneous to the Poti attack, the Russian Air Force conducted a bombing run on the 2nd Brigade’s base in Senaki. The brigade was not present but over a thousand reservists that had been assembled at the base suffered the losses of 7 killed and 12 wounded. As the Georgian military was unable to provide weapons and equipment for the reservists, their mobilization orders were canceled and the men were sent home. Several Russian bombs hit the

railway station, and several houses near the base, which ended up killing civilians and destroying civilian buildings.

In the early morning of August 9th, a group of Russian vessels arrived at the port of Ochamchira bringing with them the battalion combat team of the 7th Guard Airborne Assault Division from Novorossiysk, which consisted of over 600 troops and about 120 units of different vehicles and armament. At daybreak, the Abkhazian MoD decided to follow the recommendations of Russia and conduct a so-called clearing operation in the Kodori Valley. Russian and Abkhazian units were assembled in the area of Lata and the Zemo-Lata villages. In the afternoon, the task group began their offensive against the Georgian 5th Brigade and Interior Forces units in order to push them out of the Kodori Valley. The Georgian strongpoints were hit by artillery, and came under assault by Mi-24 and Mi-8TV helicopters and Su-25 aircraft.

At 1600, the Russian MoD declared the establishment of a security zone in the Black Sea that would follow the Abkhazian coastline. Russian warships would patrol this zone, and the entry of other vessels without Russian permission was prohibited. At the same time, a squadron of ships of the Black Sea Fleet led by the flagship missile cruiser “Moscow” departed Sevastopol and headed towards the Abkhazian coast. By nightfall, several Georgian naval vessels tried to leave the Poti harbor and move to the port of Sukhumi [the author probably meant Bathumi, as Sukhumi was under Abkhazian control – *Editor*] but upon encountering missile attacks from Russian warships, they returned to Poti.

5.4. August 10th – the Third Day of the War

The duel between the Russian and Georgian artillery lasted all night. The Georgians fired at the Zarski bypass, as it was being used by the Russians to bring reinforcements to Tskhinvali. The Russians fired at the presumed locations of the Georgian forces. At the same time the Russian Air Force bombed the airstrip of the Tbilisi Aircraft Manufacturing Company and a communications center in Urta near Zugdidi. At night, units of the Russian 42nd MRD, which had completed a 300 km road march from Chechnya, began entering South Ossetia and moving south. A Spetsnaz unit, a battalion combat team of the Pskov 76th AAD, and the Chechen Vostok Battalion conducted a clearing operation in the Georgian Liakhvi corridor north of Tskhinvali and started securing the Zarski bypass in order to provide unhindered movement for the main force of the 42nd MRD to Tskhinvali.

The Russian command was forced to use its elite units for the clearing operation in order to prevent rogue Ossetian fighters from committing atrocities in the Georgian villages. It took the Russian units the whole day to gain control of the South Ossetian capital. The 42nd MRD included the 70th and 71st MRR, the 50th self-propelled artillery regiment, the 417th reconnaissance battalion, and numerous logistics units, with a total of 4500 troops, 29 T-62 and T62M tanks, about 40 self-propelled howitzers and over 250 IFVs and APCs. Two battalion combat teams from the 76th AAD, and the 503rd MRR of the 19th MRD arrived the same day. By midday, there were over 10 000 Russian troops in South Ossetia – about the same number which Georgia had deployed at the beginning of their operation. Around noon, 10 Russian attack and transport helicopters arrived from North Ossetia to Java, which increased the air support capability for the Russian ground forces and unit maneuverability in the mountaineous terrain.¹⁰⁶

Around noon, the last Georgian units departed South Ossetia. Due to the lack of central command and control, their withdrawal and further activities were uncoordinated and even chaotic. Unit commanders received no guidance from higher headquarters and acted as they saw fit. Immediately after reaching Georgian territory, some units of the 2nd Brigade started organizing a defense around the villages that were south and southeast of Tskhinvali near the border. Other Georgian units remained on standby in the villages between Tskhinvali and Gori and had no clue of what to do next. The Georgian command was unable to organize either a defense along the South Ossetian border, or any combat activity for the defense of Georgian territory against possible Russian attacks.

At 1730 Georgia made an official statement that it would stop combat activities and withdraw all units from the conflict region. Nevertheless, Russian and Georgian artillery continued to exchange fire. Russian combat aircraft conducted bombing runs on Georgian units in the area between Gori and Tskhinvali. A Russian missile destroyed the air traffic control radar at the Tbilisi International Airport. Before midnight, Georgian artillery again opened fire from their territory, on Tskhinvali. The Russian 71st MRR was hit with 3 troops killed and 18 wounded. Shortly before midnight, the remaining units of the 693rd MRR from the 19th MRD entered Tskhinvali via Zarski bypass and joined the battalion combat team that had arrived in the early hours of the conflict.

¹⁰⁶The Tanks of August, pp. 66–67.

Not knowing the status and intents of Georgian units, the Russian forces proceeded to reinforce their defensive positions around Tskhinvali. At nightfall, Russian Special Forces also commenced operations. At night, Russian helicopters entered deep into Georgian territory and deployed several Spetsnaz teams for reconnaissance and diversion purposes. There is no further information on the activities of the Russian Special Forces in the August war but apparently they did not conduct any significant missions. The Georgians also state that they did not detect any such activities, thus the role of Russian Special Forces was quite marginal.

There were no larger clashes between the Georgian and Russian units during the day. The Georgians made no attempts to attack the Russian forces, but the Georgian artillery remained active (see Figure 6).

5.5. Events in Abkhazia on August 10th

In the early morning of August 10th, the 7th GAAD's battalion combat team, which had left Novorossiysk on amphibious landing vessels, landed on the Abkhazian coast in the vicinity of Ochamchira (see Figure 6). An hour and a half later, another battalion combat team from the 31st Independent Guards Air Assault Brigade in Ulyanovsk landed on the Babushar air field in transport planes. By midday, there were a total of 4 airborne assault battalion combat teams in Abkhazia. At the same time, the main body of the 7th GAAD started arriving via railway.

By 1000, the Abkhazian MoD had completed the mobilization and the reservists had been directed to their units. The Abkhazian military now consisted of approximately 9000 troops. Throughout the day Russian artillery and combat aircraft continued their strikes against the Georgian positions in the Kodori valley. In the afternoon, Russian and Abkhazian units entered the demilitarized zone at the Georgian border, which had been prescribed by the international peacekeeping treaty, and set up positions along the Inguri River that followed the border. In the evening, the Russian command in Abkhazia announced that there were 9000 Russian troops in Abkhazia, consisting mostly of airborne assault units with a total of 350 armored vehicles. The Russian forces took control of the bridge on the Inguri River, then entered Georgian territory in the Zugdidi area and set up bivouac.

5.6. August 11th – the Fourth Day of the War

Russian air attacks on objects in Georgian territory continued all night. The vital air defense radar in Shavshebi, near Gori, was destroyed by a missile at midnight. The civilian air control radar located on Mkhati hill near Tbilisi, which was also a part of the Georgian air surveillance system, was hit by a missile in the early morning. The Georgian Air Force command center was also attacked, and the Shiraki airfield was damaged. At 0600 the tank battalion base in Gori was hit for the second time. An hour later, Russian attack helicopters conducted a raid to the Senaki airfield near the Abkhazian border and destroyed two Georgian Mi-24V and Mi-14BT helicopters.¹⁰⁷ The Georgian air defense system was by then completely paralyzed and unable to do anything to defend the country. The situation was somewhat alleviated by the fact that the Russian Air Force used mostly unguided and technologically expired bombs that had not been maintained properly. Over half of them failed to detonate.

The night in the South Ossetian capital was relatively quiet. The flow of Russian forces into the “separatist republic” continued. In order to ensure that Tskhinvali and South Ossetian territory remained out of Georgian artillery range the Russian command decided to conduct an offensive. The purpose was to push the Georgian units from the border areas back to the depths of the Georgian territory, and establish a buffer zone along the South Ossetian border. The mission was assigned to a task group consisting of two regimental combat teams of the 19th MRD. The first task group consisted of a battalion combat team from the 243rd Airborne Assault Regiment of the 76th AAD serving as the advance party. This was combined with the 70th MRR, which served as the main force. They assembled in the area east of the Liakhvi River.

The second regimental combat team, with the 693rd MRR serving as the main force, assembled in the area south of Tskhinvali. Its task was to attack south along the western bank of the Liakhvi River. The advance party for the 693rd MRR was a battalion combat team from the 104th Airborne Assault Regiment of the 76th AAD. Both regimental combat teams were ordered to advance 20-25 km into Georgian territory and set up defensive positions in order to halt the attacks of the Georgian artillery, and keep them out of range of the South Ossetian territory. The Russian units started moving into Georgian territory at 1030 with the airborne troops as the advance party. As

¹⁰⁷The Tanks of August, p. 69.

they did not meet any serious resistance, the airborne troops quickly reached their specified destination.

The 693rd MRR was ambushed in the Zemo-Khviti village, probably by troops of the Georgian 2nd Brigade. In a fierce clash, the Russians lost a T-72 tank and two BMP-2 vehicles; 5 troops were killed, and a dozen wounded. The regiment split up. The larger contingent continued the offensive in the principal direction. The second, which was supported by a reinforcement company from the Chechen “Vostok” Battalion, surrounded the village and conducted a clearing operation that was then extended to neighboring villages. Before noon, a task unit of 300 from the 234th Airborne Assault Regiment of the 76th AAD was sent to reinforce the task group. Throughout the operation, airborne units mostly operated as advance parties for the main force.

At around 1500, a Russian Su-25 accidentally attacked a Russian unit moving east of the Liakhvi River. The bombs destroyed a fuel tanker and several troops were wounded. The unit fired MANPADS at the attacking aircraft. The aircraft was hit and caught fire, but was able to return to base.

When Russian airborne troops entered the Variani village, they discovered a large Georgian logistics base that was probably used for resupplying the Georgian units operating in the conflict region. After a short exchange of fire, the Russians seized the base and the equipment.

The last units of the Georgian 2nd Brigade, which were still defending their positions, observed the advancing Russian offensive. Lacking any guidance for further activities from the Joint Staff, the units withdrew towards Gori. When the engineering company reached the Tskhinvali-Gori highway, they found themselves at the tail end of a Russian airborne troop convoy. A fierce battle ensued which ended when tanks and infantry came to the assistance of the airborne troops. A total of 17 Georgian troops were killed and over 10 vehicles destroyed. At 1700, the Georgian Joint Staff made the last effort to stop the Russian units. Six Georgian Mi-24 attack helicopters advanced on a Russian convoy moving between Pkhvenisi and Dzerevi, destroying two vehicles. But they were unable to slow the offensive.

Before evening, the numerous Georgian units that had gathered in the Gori area heard a rumor that Russian forces were moving towards the town. This caused a massive unorganized retreat towards Tbilisi and Khutaisi. Some units vanished altogether as their troops simply dispersed. Later that evening the Russians reached their specified limit of advance. Without knowing the status and location of the Georgian units, the Russians immediately proceeded to establish defensive positions. The night passed without

incident. The remaining Georgian combat capable units had withdrawn towards Tbilisi and set about establishing defensive positions on the access roads to the capital.

On August 11th, Russian reinforcements continued to arrive to South Ossetia. By evening, there were a total of 14,000 Russian troops with approximately 100 tanks, over 100 self-propelled artillery and 40 MLRS systems, over 400 IFVs and 200 various armored vehicles in South Ossetia and in the Georgian border area.¹⁰⁸

Events in Abkhazia on August 11

In the morning, two additional battalion combat teams from the 7th GAAD entered Georgian territory in the vicinity of Zugdidi. The Russian forces ordered the city police to surrender their weapons. At the same time, the Abkhazian government issued an ultimatum to the Georgian troops and policemen in the Kodori valley, demanding that they abandon all their weapons and leave the valley. The combined Russian-Abkhazian task force formed assault units to seize the valley and disarm the Georgian troops.

After midday, a unit from the Russian 7th GAAD entered the empty Senaki base along with Georgian traffic police and UN observers. The Russians found four T-72 tanks and a Buk-M1 SAM system with two transporter erector launcher (TEL) vehicles and a few missiles. Two tanks, which were immobile, were blown up, and the other two were towed to Abkhazia.

In the evening, a Russian airborne company left Zugdidi, drove to the mouth of the Kodori valley, and blocked it. The Georgian troops and police in the valley were now surrounded. They realized the hopelessness of their situation, laid down their arms, and left the valley in small groups or individually. According to the Russians, their airborne troops did not hinder their movement. By nightfall, a reconnaissance party of Russian airborne troops on BMD armored vehicles reached the town of Poti.

5.7. August 12th – the Fifth Day of the War

In the morning, the Russian forces took control of the entire area between Tskhinvali and Gori. By 1100, a battalion from the 963rd MRR reached the main hill near Gori where a TV tower was located. Russians captured a battery of Georgian 100 mm anti-tank guns that had been abandoned

¹⁰⁸The Tanks of August, p. 72.

by their crew. From that hill, the Russian troops were then able to control the Tbilisi-Bathumi highway, the railway, and the city of Gori.

Shortly before noon, the Russian troops launched two new Iskander SSMs, although it was probably only for training or testing purposes. One of them exploded very close to the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline. The Georgian government later accused Moscow of attempting to damage the pipeline. The second missile hit the central square in Gori, killing 8 locals and a Dutch journalist.

That day, Russian President Medvedev announced that “the operation for forcing the Georgian government to accept peace has ended”, adding that Russian forces had orders to smother any pockets of resistance. At 1500, the Russians formally ceased combat operations. As Georgian forces had stopped their resistance and withdrawn south, avoiding armed contact, there was a wide neutral zone between the two armies. Russian airborne troops soon reached Gori and blocked the city from the northeast and northwest, cutting off all roads in these directions. There, they found abundant supplies of weapons, ammunition, technology, and other military supplies.

Under the command of the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity, a campaign of ethnic cleansing commenced in the Georgian villages of South Ossetia. Georgians were either killed or evicted from their homes, as their houses with their property were then burned to ground.

The main forces of the 1st Brigade deployed to Iraq returned to Georgia by the end of the day on US transportation planes. They were tasked with defending Tbilisi. The United States had earlier reached an agreement with the Russian General Staff that the Russian Air Force would not harass the American planes transporting Georgian troops.

In the evening, there was a large public meeting in Tbilisi where President Shaakashvili announced Georgia’s departure from the Commonwealth of Independent States. Presidents from Poland, Ukraine, Estonia and Lithuania along with the Latvian Prime Minister arrived to show their support to the Georgian people. In the evening, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy arrived from Moscow, bringing with him a proposal from the Kremlin to end the hostilities. According to Sarkozy, the Georgian President accepted the proposal.

Events in Abkhazia on August 12th

In the early morning, the Russian and Abkhazian units commenced the final phase of the operation to occupy the Kodori valley. Russian combat aircraft conducted strikes against the Georgian defensive positions near the Lower

Adjara villages before initiating the ground offensive. Several hours later, Russians landed a helicopterborne air assault team behind the defensive positions of the Georgian MoI units. The Russians and the Abkhazians occupied the key villages of Upper and Lower Adjara in the valley without any resistance. Afterwards, the Georgian units started laying down their weapons and surrendering en masse. The combined task force reached the Georgian border by the end of the day. The Kodori valley fell completely under Russian and Abkhazian control.¹⁰⁹

In the afternoon, troops from the Russian 45th Airborne Assault Regiment entered the Poti naval base and blew up all abandoned Georgian naval vessels. Almost the entire Georgian fleet was destroyed: six vessels, including both of Georgia's most important missile crafts "Thbilisi" and "Dioscuria" (see Figure 7).

5.8. Final Phase of the August War

August 13th

Despite Russian President Medvedev's declaring the end of the military operation, Russian forces continued their aggressions on August 13th. Russian units took complete control of Gori, which was Stalin's birthplace. They then took control over most of the 70 km Gori–Thbilisi highway and halted only 20 km before the capital. This caused massive panic in Thbilisi as the Georgians thought that the Russians intended to capture the capital, and there was no military defense system in place to defend it.

The Russian forces established checkpoints on the Gori access roads. They also began to collect and relocate Georgian military supplies. The Russian and Ossetian units continued to attack the Georgian villages near the South Ossetian border. Western journalists noted a massive exodus of nearly 100,000 refugees to Gori, and from there, to Thbilisi.

August 14th

The Georgian Parliament abrogated all documents pertaining to Georgia's entrance to the CIS. On the same day, the so-called Presidents of the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Eduard Kokoity and Sergei Bagapsh, signed a conflict solution plan in Moscow with Russian

¹⁰⁹The Tanks of August, p. 74.

President Medvedev witnessing it. During the subsequent press conference, Medvedev announced that the Russian leadership would support “any decision made by the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”.

The Georgian Joint Staff started to recover from the shock. On August 14th, they attempted to restore the military command, control systems, and combat capabilities. All existing units with even minimal combat capabilities were deployed to the border of the Russian occupied buffer zone, but strictly avoided any armed contact. At the same time, the Russian airborne troops continued their relocation of military supplies from the military bases in Gori. Immobile or unnecessary technology was destroyed. The Russians blew up 20 Georgian T-72 tanks, and numerous BTR-80 APCs and BMP-2 IFVs. The Russians also demolished the newly built barracks and HQ building of the 1st Brigade. Georgian police tried to enter Gori after Medvedev’s declaration [of August 12th – *Editor*] but the Russian troops manning the checkpoints refused to let them through.¹¹⁰

On August 15th the Russian Air Force conducted a barbaric act by dropping incendiary bombs on the Borjomi National Park. Moscow’s cynicism peaked with their refusal to allow Turkish and Ukrainian firefighting aircraft to enter Georgian air space in order to help to fight the immense conflagration. A large portion of the virgin forest was destroyed. The destruction of Georgian settlements, businesses and infrastructure as well as the killing of innocent people continued the next day. The Russian Air Force attacked several villages in the Kaspi region and the Okami winery. Around midday, Russian sappers mined the railway bridge in Kaspi and demolished it.

Russia and Georgia conducted negotiations initiated by French President Sarkozy on August 15th and 16th, and finalized them by signing a six-point truce. On August 18th, Moscow formally announced the withdrawal of its forces from Georgia. However, the Russians maintained a “flexible” approach to the truce and the agreements. Over the following days, they continued the collect and relocate Georgian military supplies. The Russians also continued the destruction of Georgian military infrastructure at the bases in Gori, Senaki, Poti, and in the Kodori valley. At the Senaki Air Base, they demolished the air traffic control center, the airstrip, and the hangars. The naval base in Poti was almost completely destroyed. The Russians confiscated and relocated all vessels, including the new patrol craft acquired before the war.

¹¹⁰ **The Tanks of August**, p. 75.

With an eye towards the future, Moscow's goal was to weaken the Georgian economy and its military capabilities to the fullest extent possible, keeping the future in mind. Putin had failed to topple Shaakashvili's Western-oriented government, yet apparently, the Russian "national leader" Putin and his General Staff were still considering another potential offensive against Tbilisi.

On August 22nd, the Russian MoD announced that the Russian Federation has completed the withdrawal of its forces from Georgia in accordance with the truce. Several days later, on August 25th and 26th, the Russian State Duma formally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see Figure 8).

On August 28th, the Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze announced, that Georgia would cease diplomatic relations with Russia and declared Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be occupied territories.

5.9. The Alleged Georgian Plan to Conquer Abkhazia

On August 27th, 2008, during a meeting with journalists, the Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Anatoli Nogovitsyn announced that troops of the Russian "Zapad" task force which had entered Georgian territory and captured Senaki, had found a plan outlining conquest of Abkhazia called "The Rock" from the 2nd Brigade's base. The plan had allegedly been crafted before the conflict. According to this plan, it was the intention of the Georgian Joint Staff to create a task force of 3 brigades consisting of 9000 troops, with a mission to reach Sukhumi and capture it within 2 days. One of the brigades was to advance along the Black Sea coast and the other along the Kodori valley. The third brigade was to be kept in the general reserve during the first phase and then prepared for the battle in order to complete the follow-up mission of the task force, of reaching the Russian border.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Грузия планировала захватить Абхазию группировкой до девяти тысяч военнослужащих. – Генштаб РФ 2008. – ИНТЕРФАКС-АВН. 27 августа 2008, Москва.

Part VI: Losses of the Conflict Parties

Human losses in the August war fortunately turned out to be much smaller than those declared by the Russian MoD, the media, and the South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity. Kokoity reported that there had been up to 2000 Ossetian casualties on the first evening of the war.

Georgia

Georgia suffered the greatest losses from the war. According to Tbilisi's official data, Georgia lost 170 troops, 14 policemen and 228 civilians in the August war. 1,964 uniformed personnel were wounded and 14 troops were missing in action.¹¹² Despite intensive combat, personnel losses were still relatively small. Georgian officers attribute this to effective personal protection, especially bulletproof vests and helmets. Also, the period of combat was quite short.

There were much larger losses among civilians. Following the command of their leader Eduard Kokoity, South Ossetian authorities destroyed almost all Georgian villages in their territory during the campaign of ethnic cleansing. Over 100,000 civilians were forced to flee South Ossetia and Abkhazia. About 35,000 were left with nowhere to return to, as their homes were destroyed. The Ossetians were especially cruel, a fact which has been confirmed by Russian military members, and Moscow's official news channels. In order to avoid appearing as Eastern barbarians, the Russians were forced to intervene against heinous acts committed by the Ossetians, and try to keep a somewhat civil face on the whole operation. The war neither ended the conflict between the two peoples nor brought a solution to the problem, and rather if anything, further aggravated it.¹¹³

The Georgian task force lost a total of 14 tanks, 5 BMP-2s, a Cobra armored vehicle, and 2, 152 mm self-propelled "Dana" howitzers during the combat in Tskhinvali and its surroundings. Georgian troops abandoned nearly 20 122 mm D-30 howitzers, and 120 mm mortars near the village of Khetagurovo, in Gori, and in the Kodori Valley. The Russians immediately turned these over to the Abkhazians and the Ossetians, forgoing them as part of the Russian loot. Most of the weaponry and equipment captured by the

¹¹² **The Tanks of August**, p. 107.

¹¹³ **Tagliavini, H.** 2009. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia 2009. Report, September, p. 26. < http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_09_09_iiffmgc_report.pdf>, (16.10.2015). [Hereinafter **Tagliavini 2009**]

Russians was abandoned by the withdrawing units when they ran out of fuel. The Georgian logistics system simply failed and could not resupply fuel to the combat zone. The Georgian Air Force lost 3 light transport planes, and 4 helicopters, in addition to the two helicopters at the Senaki airfield that were blown up by the Russians. The Russians also destroyed most of the Georgian navy vessels at the Poti naval base and at sea.¹¹⁴ It is unknown how much equipment and technology, especially wheeled armored vehicles, was destroyed by the Russians in Gori and Senaki as these were not listed among the trophies.

According to official data presented by the Russian MoD on August 20, 2008, the Russians captured the following from Georgia:

- 65 T-72 and T-55 tanks, 44 of which were in working order and usable,
- 15 BMP-2 IFVs,
- 2 Buk-M1 SAM systems and a few missiles,
- 5 OSA-AK SAM systems,
- 6 Cobra light armored transport vehicles,
- 2 “Dana” 152 mm self-propelled howitzers,
- 16 different types of naval crafts,
- 764 US origin M-16 assault rifles,
- 28 US origin M-40 machine guns,
- 754 Kalashnikov assault rifles.¹¹⁵

These trophies were demonstrated to selected journalists on August 18th. When we consider the technology lost or destroyed during the conflict, it appears that Georgia lost over 30% of its tanks and almost its entire naval fleet. The Russians also captured numerous command and communication equipment and tens of tons of different ammunition types. The Russians captured an especially large amount of equipment from Gori, Poti and Senaki. It has to be noted that most of the material losses occurred not during combat, but after the Russians captured Georgian bases. The reason for this is that Georgia had not organized a timely evacuation of armament, technology and materiel.

¹¹⁴ *The Tanks of August*, pp. 110–112.

¹¹⁵ **О российских трофеях, захваченных в ходе боевых действий в Южной Осетии и Грузии.** – Vlasti.net. News. <<http://vlasti.net/news/20500@1019>>, (24.08.2013).

Russia

According to the Russian General Staff, there were 67 soldiers killed, 323 wounded, and 8 taken as prisoners of war.¹¹⁶ On August 19th, Georgia and Russia officially traded prisoners. Georgia returned 5 Russian soldiers, and received 15 Georgian soldiers in return.

In combat, the Georgian troops destroyed 7 Russian tanks and over 20 armored vehicles. The Russian Air Force suffered the heaviest losses. Despite its overwhelming superiority, especially when compared to Georgian air defense capabilities, Russia lost 6 combat aircrafts (the seventh loss remains questionable but most likely did belong to Russia), including 2 Su-25BMs, 1 Su-25SM, 2 Su-24Ms, 1 Tu-22M3 heavy bomber, and 2 helicopters (Mi-8MTKO and Mi-24). Three of these aircraft were destroyed by friendly fire.¹¹⁷

South Ossetia

After the war the South Ossetian authorities reported 365 troops and civilians killed.¹¹⁸ Representatives of Human Rights Watch, which investigated the situation in South Ossetia after the war, announced on August 14th, that 44 dead, and 273 wounded personnel had been taken to the Tskhinvali hospital since August 6.

¹¹⁶ Генштаб назвал число потерь России в Южной Осетии 2008. – Коммерсант, 20.08.2008. <<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1013807>>, (25.08.2013).

¹¹⁷ *The Tanks of August*, p. 104.

¹¹⁸ Шенин 2009, с. 262–285.

Part VII: Conclusions from the Georgian Activities

President Mikheil Shaakashvili was certainly a forceful, sagacious, determined, and energetic leader of the state. His team mostly consisted of young, Western-educated, expeditious individuals. This team was able to turn around a “failed” country that was breaking up and shape it into a modern democratic developing country in just four years, from 2004 to 2008. The president and his team, however, possessed multiple shortcomings characteristic of young leaders. Their success elevated their self-perception and resulted in an overestimation of their personal capabilities, as well as those of the state. This is an extremely dangerous miscalculation in the realm of military national defense. Whereas mistakes made in the civilian sphere can be corrected, the consequences of decisions and activities conducted in the sphere of national security and defense can be fatal for the state and the people. Furthermore, these implications may be permanent and impossible to change later.

President Shaakashvili was extremely reckless in trying to Europeanize the Georgian state and territories, as well as its various ethnicities, in such a short span of time. Successes experienced during the first years of his presidency made him feel that he knew what was best for all of Georgia. This attitude was reflected in his policies towards the territories striving for separation. Shaakashvili did not consider the complicated historic background of the Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian people. Instead of seeking to overcome this historic hostility by conducting constructive and peaceful politics and advocating cooperation as a means for achieving integration with the Georgians, Shaakashvili rather decided to attempt integration by force. An old Estonian proverb states that violence does not breed affinity. Today, it is very likely that Georgia has lost these territories forever.

Shaakashvili’s authoritarian leadership style, combined with his black-or-white perception of people, and his “if you are not my ally, you are my enemy” attitude, created an atmosphere of permanent fear among the Georgian political and military leadership, who felt that their jobs were not secure. Often, people who were loyal to the president but ill-suited to the job were assigned to key civilian and military positions. As he lacked knowledge of personnel policies, as well as an understanding that every leader must have professional competence, in addition to a certain adjustment period, Shakaashvili ended up changing the political and military leadership like socks both before and after the August war.

From 2004 to 2008, the following personnel changes were made:

- Four Ministers of Defense together with almost all of the personnel of the MoD;
- Four Commanders of the Joint Staff together with all of the department heads;
- Five Commanders of the National Guard (they were also also in command of the military reserve) since 2005.

Also, since 2005, many capable and highly qualified senior and general officers were forced to retire. In July 2008, a month before the war, the head of the military intelligence was replaced, as well as most of the brigade and battalion commanders. The replacements were incompetent and were not known or trusted by the units.¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, an unjustified and elevated self-perception, combined with the principle that “the state has provided with me a position and the necessary skills will follow”, is also very apparent among the young leadership and officials of Estonia.

The decision to enter South Ossetia by force was mostly political. It appears, however, that the Georgian political leadership did not consider several things. The most significant shortcoming of the plan for retaking South Ossetia was the fact that Tbilisi completely ruled out the potential for armed clashes with Russian forces. The Georgian armed forces were neither psychologically nor militarily prepared for such a possibility.¹²⁰ Nor were they ever even informed that it could be a possibility, and as a result unexpected encounters with Russian forces on the battlefield came as a shock to them. Due to the presumed lack of a Russian threat, the Georgians failed in the following:

- To plan and prepare for a defense in the direction of Abkhazia;
- To create an air defense system to protect their ground units from attacks by Russian combat aircraft and helicopters;
- To establish a logistics system to resupply the units.

The Georgians also overestimated the capability of their armed forces, which were actually still quite young (only 4 years), to conduct extensive military

¹¹⁹ **Independent Experts’ Club (IEC)** 2009. Crisis in Georgia, 2008. Preconditions, Reality, Perspectives. Tbilisi. <http://fes.ge/de/images/Fes_Files/09_GeoP/crisis%202008%20in%20georgia_final.pdf>, (27.08.2013).

¹²⁰ **The August 2008 South Ossetia Conflict: Revising the Status Quo.** RUSI Analysis, August 11, 2008.

operations, and rather relied on the hope that South Ossetia would be captured quickly. The Georgian political leadership became too eagerly involved in the command and control of the military, which resulted in chaos on the battlefield. Relinquishing the plan to close the Roki tunnel, the reckless withdrawal from Tskhinvali, and the subsequent failed attempt to reenter the city can also be attributed to inexperienced political and military leaders who simply lost their head.

The war also showed that in the buildup of its national defense, Tbilisi erred by following the Western expeditionary army model. The Georgians completely ignored the need to structure their armed forces, and adopt the appropriate tactics and training, in a way that would have enabled them to conduct missions specific to the Georgian security situation and its military threats, as well as provide an initial self-defense capability. The August war clearly demonstrated that the composition and command structure, and the decision-making methodology of the Georgian armed forces, work well for conducting peacekeeping operations in another state along with coalition forces, but are not effective for national defense in a conventional battle against an overwhelming aggressor.

When considering the possibility of Russia attacking simultaneously from multiple directions, a territorial defense system would certainly have been more appropriate for Georgia, rather than the establishment of large non-territorial brigades unsuited for mountain warfare. Battalions, which were the backbone of the brigade, did not have independent combat capabilities, but were rather part of a larger mechanism. The Georgians should have placed special attention on creating company and battalion level combat teams and training them for independent action. Preparations should have been made to equip these combat teams with a sufficient amount of mortars and light anti-armor and anti-aircraft weapons. If the number of casualties suffered by the Russians had been greater, then it would have brought wider attention to the conflict in Russia, as well as internationally.

Territorial combat teams with sufficient manpower and equipment would have provided for an independent combat capability, and a defensive capacity, even if there were to be a loss of central command and control. This would have enabled the implementation of a unified command, thus improving significantly the command and control of the entire national defense structure (military, National Guard, and MoI units) within each region. Moreover, this would have benefited the preparations for war and made defensive action more efficient. In this case, the completely undefended Abkhazian frontier, which the Russians crossed completely unhindered, plundering and looting as

they wished, would never have occurred. Under a territorial defense doctrine, wartime maneuver units (two or three mechanized brigades) could have been used for the most important missions, including the South Ossetian operation.

The war also clearly illustrated the shortcomings of the Georgian officer corps in planning for and conducting combat, and in the leadership at operational and tactical level units. It showed that the preparations, professionalism, steadfastness and independent thinking of company and battalion leadership have a decisive importance on the battlefield.

The combat skills and characteristics of the Georgian soldiers have already been briefly mentioned. The emotionality and sensitivity characteristic of the Southern Caucasus people contributed to their quickly panicking when encountering an overwhelming enemy. The hesitant Georgian command was unable to instill confidence, and to impose the necessary discipline. Under intense pressure (artillery, bombardments of command posts, EW), the Georgian command and control system quickly disintegrated. In engagements with Russian units, the Georgians succumbed to an inferiority complex, and a sharp decline in marital spirit as they felt the hopelessness of fighting against overwhelming Russian forces. In this sense, the mentality of Georgian troops radically differed from the Finnish troops in the Winter War of 1939–1940, and the Chechen fighters in the First Chechen War of 1994–1996. Georgian commanders have themselves admitted later that their troops experienced combat shock from the massive bombardments by Russian aircraft and artillery. There were some instances of insubordination, and the generally weak discipline resulted in several units disbanding in the last days of the war.

The Georgian officers also later noted that the air defense was insufficient for maneuver units. The Strela SAM systems produced in the Ukraine experienced numerous misfires and the missiles were largely ineffective against bomber aircraft. The Israeli-produced Rafael systems were significantly more efficient, and forced the Russian aircraft to stay at higher altitudes, thereby hindering the accuracy of their bombing attacks against smaller targets. The second major problem was the lack of anti-armor weaponry of the brigades. The abandonment of the plan to close the strategically vital Roki tunnel remains a mystery as well.

Summarily, the major problems experienced by the Georgian armed forces were as follows:

- 1) The constant involvement of the Georgian political leadership in the operational command of the forces which caused great confusion in the chain of command.

- 2) Low morale, weak discipline, and a feeling of inferiority against the Russian forces.
- 3) Inadequate reconnaissance and weak analysis capability of enemy activities: the Georgians could not foresee the involvement of Russian forces, nor was the national leadership aware of its imminence.
- 4) The armed forces leadership was young and lacked sufficient training and education. Thus, they were too inexperienced to command units at the operational and tactical level on the battlefield.
- 5) Georgian units were individually well equipped and armed, but unprepared for conventional combat as battalions or brigades. Unit training before the war focused on peacekeeping operations, and, to some extent, on offensive maneuvers. Defense and delay operations were not rehearsed at all.
- 6) Combined arms cooperation among the various components of the Georgian Army (armor, infantry, artillery, and air defense) was limited.
- 7) Artillery observation and direction capabilities, and its subsequent efficiency were limited as the infantry units lacked forward observers. The observers were in artillery units, but they did not move with infantry, thus they were unable to provide timely and efficient fire support for the units in a dynamic combat environment.
- 8) Weak anti-armor capability: the infantry units had anti-tank grenade launchers but no anti-tank missile systems or recoilless rifles. The anti-armor missions of the Georgian tanks had little combat success in Tskhinvali, and in the limited observation and maneuver conditions of the mountains.
- 9) The armed forces reserve was unprepared and the mobilization system undeveloped.
- 10) The logistics system failed. There were no supplies for a longer conflict: food, ammunition, fuel, etc.

Part VIII: Summary of Russian Military Activities

The Russian military operation in Georgia was conducted as a joint operation which had been planned and rehearsed well in advance. When considering the particular characteristics of Russia's military organization, the limited number of units, as well as their ultimate destinations, including the blockade of the Black Sea coast by Russian warships, it is evident that the planned attack on Georgia was to come from multiple directions, and occur simultaneously. The command and control of the Russian forces, and the speed at which they were mobilized and deployed demonstrated proficiency at the operational level. Russia, in just a few days, was able to establish a strong task force capable of actively maneuvering armored forces in the complicated mountainous terrain of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The whole operation was confidently led from command posts that were located in the immediate vicinity of the conflict area, or in the actual area itself. The lack of clear front lines during combat enabled bold maneuvering by armor units, and facilitated their quick advance deep into Georgian territory.

There were no major innovations in the Russian art of war. Notably, the utilization of airborne forces was odd. Russia did not conduct air assaults and instead used airborne forces mostly as infantry. There was just one, company-level air assault on helicopters conducted during the war. However, there was a specific reason for the widespread use of airborne forces. Alexander Khramchikhin, the head of the analysis department of the Russian Centre for Political and Military Studies explains it as follows:

Russia does not have infantry as such (motorized infantry). In other words, there is a large motorized infantry but they don't know how to fight. Since the first day of the war the airborne forces and Spetsnaz were used for infantry missions. Units from the 76th AAD, 7th AAD (Mountain) and 31st Air Assault Brigade were deployed to combat operations immediately. They were not deployed by air, but rather by ground, like regular infantry."¹²¹

According to Khramchikhin, the Chechen Vostok Battalion under the command of Sulim Yamadaev, Hero of the Russian Federation was the other successful combat group. It cannot be ruled out that the Vostok Battalion was perhaps the most efficient unit of the Russian military in this war.¹²² The Russian General Staff also had a good operational and strategic level

¹²¹ Venemaa *toimik* 2008. Venemaa-Gruusia sõja sõjalised õppetunnid, august 2008. Baltic Center for Russian Studies. Tallinn, lk 7.

¹²² *Ibid.*

intelligence picture of the Georgian military activities. But the key role in Russia's success can be attributed to the skillful use of the well-trained airborne units who had high morale, and executed their operations very well.

In general, however, despite the Russian military's thorough training and preparations, and the exemplary conduct of war by its elite airborne forces, it entered the war with the presumptions of a classic major power hoping to squash a weaker enemy. This was also the attitude of the Red Army in 1939 during the first Finnish Winter War, before it encountered massive losses. And in 1994, the then Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev promised to beat the Chechen rebels in Grozny with just one regiment of airborne forces, and the rest would be history. The Russian attitude in the August war was belied by the fact that they used dated technology from the 1960's and 1970's and had no modern global positioning, communications, or night vision devices. Additionally, the Russian Air Force used expired ammunition and consequently, about 50% of their bombs failed to detonate. The aircraft also lacked identification-friendly-or-foe (IFF) devices, which resulted in several losses due to friendly fire. Of the approximately 280 combat aircraft that participated in the five-day air campaign, all of them, except the Tu-22M3 heavy bombers, lacked night vision capabilities. The lack of night vision also resulted in the inability to conduct tactical reconnaissance by Russian battalions and resulted in the nearly blind movement of convoys in South Ossetia as demonstrated aptly by the Georgian ambush on the 58th Army's convoy and its commander.

Russian experts have also assessed the status of their armed forces and their activities in the five-day war. Colonel Viktor Baranets, a military observer for the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper and a person trusted by the Russian president, noted the following:

The war gave some hard lessons to be learned. /.../ First, the condition of the military technology that was used in the operation has to be assessed as critical. Almost 95% of the armored vehicles and aircraft are past their lifespan. This is why almost 15% of the technology failed during the war. Many radios on tanks stopped working in the first hours of the operation. There was a shortage of night vision and artillery reconnaissance devices, which is why the Georgian Grad systems, artillery and mortars were able to fire on the Russian and South Ossetian unit positions for hours unpunished. In essence, the new Russian Army entered the operation with strong but extremely worn-out Cold War-era metal armor. Second, the condition of Army communications systems and devices is extremely bad. Many commanders had to use their mobile phones in order to communicate with the staff and the command posts. Even General Khrulev, the commander of the 58th Army was

*forced to use a satellite phone provided by the Komsomolskaya Pravda's war correspondent, who happened to be in the same convoy with the headquarters element. Often, the enemy was able to effectively jam our radios. /.../*¹²³

Alexander Sharavin, the Director of the Russian Institute for Political and Military Analysis noted that the conflict in South Ossetia raised the issue of Russian army equipment being outdated, even when compared to the small Georgian army.

*The Georgian tanks seized as war trophies had GPS navigation systems installed which we do not have. At night, it is very difficult to navigate through unknown terrain without these devices. Our military also lacks night vision, communication and navigation devices.*¹²⁴

The military expert and retired Colonel Anatoli Tsyganok (Candidate of Military Sciences) observed:

It must be said that the Army is not quite ready for such conflicts in terms of conducting operations, force protection and technology. /.../ Night operations, reconnaissance, communications, and rear area security remain the traditional weak areas of the Russian Army. /.../ Long-term participation in counterterrorism operations in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan had a negative influence on the Army. Tactical proficiency, and the techniques and methods learned from these conflicts did not prove efficient in combat against well-trained Georgian troops. There were instances where our units became surrounded by Georgian fire. Russian units fired at each other because they had no way of tracking their exact locations. Artillery fire was corrected using optical devices originating from the 1960s to 1980s. One of the main problems – the GLONASS system does not function due to a shortage of satellites and a lack of receivers. That's why Russian units were unable to use precision weapons and guided missiles, Sentimeter-type artillery shells, and Smelchak and Grany type mines.

Remote ground sensing from reconnaissance satellites was not used as there were no suitable receiving stations. During combat, insufficient cooperation capability of tanks and infantry units was noted. Cooperation between artillery, tanks and reconnaissance units was lousy everywhere. The acute lack of modern precision weapons in the Russian Air Force is obvious, especially the shortages of the satellite guidance system Kh-555 and the anti-radiation missiles Kh-28 (90 km range) and Kh-58U (60 km range).

¹²³ **Баранец, В.** 2008. Армия шла на войну в старых латах. – Комсомольская правда, 26.08.2008. <www.kp.ru/daily/24152/368191>, (39.08.2013).

¹²⁴ **Калмацкий, М.** 2008. Военная тайна. – Новые Известия, 27.08.2008. <<http://www.ladno.ru/opinion/9922.html>>, (29.08.2013).

Currently the main offensive weapons for our Air Force are ordinary bombs and unguided missiles.

There are many obsolete tanks with in the 58th Army (about 60–75% are T-62 and T-72 tanks). /.../ Tanks constructed over 30 years ago can be considered somewhat modern during the daytime, but their night optics are beyond criticism. They allow target detection only within a few hundred meters and muzzle flashes blind them. Active infrared lights and night vision devices increase the surveillance and targeting range capabilities of the tanks, but then also significantly reduce their masking abilities. The old tanks lacked GPS devices, heat cameras as well as friend-or-foe identification systems. The outdated BMP-1 and BMD-1 infantry fighting vehicles are still used in convoys. They have thin armor, and their sights and surveillance devices are primitive. The armored personnel carriers are in a similiary state. Vehicles with adequate screens and armor are rare. Riflemen, airborne troops and reconnaissance troops still ride on top of the armored vehicles (this is safer) as the vehicles do not offer protection from explosions or penetrating missiles which will burn everything within the vehicle. There were almost no UAV-s. The Russian task force had only one UAV, the old Pchela system which weighs 140 kg, has a 60 km range, and 2 hour loiter time. The Pchela was used effectively in the first and second war in Chechnya but is now beyond its physical limits.¹²⁵

The authoritative Russian newspaper Rossiyskaja Gazeta wrote the following:

The Su-25 entered service over 30 years ago. Targeting information (approximate coordinates) is relayed to the aircraft via radio or drawn on the flight map before departure. There are no digital maps because they do not even have an onboard computer or radio location device. In even slightest fog or dusk, the Su-25 pilot is almost incapable of assessing whether it is targeting a home, an enemy military target, or friendly forces. Combat in South Ossetia showed that the use of the Su-25 has catastrophic consequences. The Russian Army simply can not use precision weapons (the Msta-S 152 mm self-propelled howitzer, and the Krasnopol guided projectile) in combat. In order to use such munitions to destroy a target over 20 km away, the target must be laser illuminated. This can be done by a reconnaissance team, or by an aircraft, including a UAV. The existing artillery reconnaissance works only near the frontier, and does not function in enemy's deep rear area. The Spetsnaz, which is capable of operating in the enemy's deep rear, is not trained to work with the artillery systems that use the Krasnopol.

It is unlikely that UAVs capable of locating and illuminating the target will be acquired in the near future. Hence, guided munitions are rusting in storage and the Msta-S still uses ordinary shells. This is why Georgian

¹²⁵Цыганок, А. 2008. Уроки пятидневной войны в Закавказье. Независимое военное обозрение, 29.08.2008. <http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2008-08-29/1_uroki.html>, (29.08.2013).

*artillery managed to escape counterbattery fire during the first phase of combat. The situation with cruise missiles and guided aircraft munitions is similar. Specific knowledge and skills are required to use such weapon systems effectively. When acquiring a smart weapon, the complete system of its implementation, which is not a simple one, must be established and prepared. It appears that there was neither the capability, nor the resources and will to do this. /.../*¹²⁶

The representative of the Russian General Staff was forced to agree with the critique, stating that the events in South Ossetia highlighted problems in supplying the Army, which must be solved in an expedited manner.

The incapability of Georgian forces to take advantage of Russian shortcomings became decisive in shaping the conflict as well as actual combat and the results. The August war confirmed the importance of artillery in ground operations. Differences in morale and the martial spirit of the two armies became painfully obvious, with the Georgians being clearly inferior in this regard. The Russian troops demonstrated their superiority, even going so far as to remove their helmets and armored vests. The war was an eye-opener for the Russian political and military leadership in terms of the pathetic state of the material and technology of the Russian military. This facilitated the launch of the most thorough and wide-scale military reform in decades. The goal of the reform is to completely modernize the Russian military by 2020 and make it efficient.

Legitimacy of the Russian offensive

The Russian offensive against Georgia was an act of aggression and lacked a legal basis. The Russian legal violations can be divided into two categories: violations of international law and violations of Russian law, both of which are described in greater detail below.

a) Violations of international law

- 1) The Russian Federation lacked a mandate from the UN, the CIS, or any other potentially reputable international organization for conducting a peace enforcement operation in Georgia.
- 2) The activities of the Russian “peacekeepers” did not meet the requirements of the UN peacekeeping statute. In addition to their questionable

¹²⁶ **Птичкин**, С. 2008. Исчезнувший “Зоопарк”. – Российская Газета, 28.08.2008. <<http://www.rg.ru/2008/08/28/zoopark.html>>, (29.08.2013).

legality, the “peacekeepers” used heavy weapons, which are prohibited by UN statutes. Russia unilaterally supported and armed the separatist forces and facilitated their provocations. Furthermore, Russia allowed “volunteer” units to enter South Ossetia and then used these units during the “peace enforcement operation” on the separatist side. The Russian “peacekeepers” became actively involved in the conflict during the war.

- 3) Russia attacked a CIS partner state without notifying other members of the Commonwealth.
- 4) Russia blatantly violated the 1992 Sochi Peace Agreement that negated the right of the Russian forces to intervene in conflicts and regulated the activities of the peacekeepers.

Heidi Tagliavini notes in her report to the European Union:

As for the conflict in South Ossetia and adjacent parts of the territory of Georgia, the Mission established that all sides to the conflict - Georgian forces, Russian forces and South Ossetian forces - committed violations of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law. Numerous violations were committed by South Ossetian irregular armed groups, by volunteers or mercenaries or by armed individuals. It is, however, difficult to identify the responsibilities for and the perpetrators of these crimes. The fact that both Georgian and Russian forces in many cases used similar armament further complicates the attribution of certain acts. If it were not for the difficulties of identification and attribution, many of these acts have features which might be described as war crimes.¹²⁷

b) Violations of the Russian Federation law

- 1) The Russian Federation law 93-FZ of 23 June 1995 that states “On assigning military and civilian personnel for providing peace and security by Russian Federation” was blatantly violated. The law stipulates that such a decision can be made by the Russian President, based on a decree by the Upper House of the Russian Parliament. The Federal Council did not even discuss the issue as it was on vacation at the time.
- 2) The Russian Federation law 53-FZ of 28 March 1998, “On the military service obligation and military service” which prohibits the use of conscripts in peace operations abroad was also violated, as units of the 58th Army included conscripts.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Tagliavini 2009, p. 26.

¹²⁸ Федеральный закон “О воинской обязанности и военной службе” от 28.03.1998 N 53-ФЗ. <<http://www.consultant.ru/popular/military/>>, (30.08.2013).

Part IX: Summary

The unexpected attack against the sovereign state of Georgia was the opening gambit of the Russian President to actualize his policy, which had already been published in 2001, by using economic and political pressure or force, if necessary, to restore control over the post-Soviet states. By attacking Georgia, Moscow again demonstrated its forked-tongued attitude towards separatism. When the breakup of the Soviet Union launched several independence campaigns by small nations, Moscow labeled these as “terrorist rebellions” and hysterically warned the international community to refrain from getting involved, as it was a Russian domestic affair. This was followed by their use of federal forces to ruthlessly crush independence attempts via massive killings and the deliberate destruction of infrastructure. This was Moscow’s modus operandi in extinguishing the independence movement in Chechnya from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2000. According to data by Human Rights Watch, the Russian federal forces killed about 230,000 people, including 42,000 children from 1994 to 2000 in the Northern Caucasus region. The Chechen capital of Grozny and numerous other cities were completely destroyed.

At the same time, the Russian authorities facilitated pro-Russian separatism by any and all means in Transnistria (against Moldova), South Ossetia and Abkhazia (against Georgia) and even in Crimea (against Ukraine) and never hesitated from using its military, if needed.

The victorious war in Georgia had several benefits for Russia:

- 1) It significantly weakened the combat capability of Georgian armed forces, thus reducing the potential ambitions of the Georgian leadership to reunite the separatist territories, should the possibility arise.
- 2) It showed the world the efficiency of its military, which will further increase as the reforms initiated by the August war take effect.
- 3) It demonstrated Western passiveness and weakness in supporting the countries neighboring Russia.
- 4) It hinted to the leadership of the CIS and other post-Soviet states that similar events may occur in their countries in certain circumstances.
- 5) Its position and influence in the Southern Caucasus were strengthened.

The war significantly damaged the trust of post-Soviet states and especially the Georgian people’s trust in NATO, the US, and the EU as the providers of international security. As Ariel Cohen and Robert Hamilton write,

The war also demonstrated the weaknesses of NATO and the EU security system, because they provided no efficient response to Russia’s forced changing

*of the borders and occupation of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) member state. The war demonstrated fissures in Europe between the Western powers eager to maintain good relations with Russia”*¹²⁹

Now Moscow, and not NATO, is viewed as the strong and influential military power by most of the world. Many US and European politicians, academics and media have criticized the impotence of the West, or in other words, the inadequately weak response to Moscow’s aggression. This aggression has been referred to as the Sudeten of the 21st century, due to the fact that Russia’s occupation of Georgian territory and the cleaving of its territorial integrity bears a striking resemblance to the way that Hitler seized German-populated areas from the Czech Republic and joined them to the German Reich in 1938. There is no doubt that Moscow will try to russify the newly independent republics and join them to the Russian empire.

On the other hand, the Russian victory in Georgia was incomplete. Russia could not topple Shaakashvili’s government and replace it with one more suitable to Moscow. The military offensive against Georgia as a sovereign state caused a shock to the world. It was also the first time that Russia became politically isolated. Nobody, with the exception of Cuba and Libya, voiced their support for the Kremlin. The CIS member states also remained silent as their capitals began to realize that one of them could become Moscow’s next victim. The silence of the Belorussian dictator Alexander Lukashenko especially aggravated the Russian MFA. Aleksandr Surikov, Russian Ambassador to Belarus announced: “We do not understand why the Belorussian government remains modestly silent. In these issues, one must express itself clearly, especially to one’s allies.”¹³⁰ In the Georgian conflict, the number of partners supporting Russia was clearly smaller than those supporting Georgia. From the first days of the war, Tbilisi received political support from Poland, Ukraine and the three Baltic States. Georgia’s candidacy for NATO membership also remained intact.

It is also vital to note that Russian aggression against a smaller neighbor forced the West to remove its rose colored glasses and realize that the neo-Stalinist activities of the Putin regime, which is striving to become a “global administrator”¹³¹, are an increasing threat to all of Europe.

¹²⁹ **Cohen, A.; Hamilton, R. E.** 2011. The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications. 09/06/2011. – Strategic Studies Institute. <<http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1069>>, p. vii-viii, (04.10.2015).

¹³⁰ **Пятидневная война 2008.**

¹³¹ **Новая русская доктрина: Пора расправить крылья** 2009. Москва: ЯУЗА, ЭКСМО, с. 275.

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FIGURES



Source: <<http://www.irishantiwar.org/files/upload-images/Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan-Oil-Pipeline.jpg>>, (12.07.2013).

Figure 1. Oil and gas pipelines in the Caucasus region.



Source: The CIA World Factbook. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gg.html>>, (22.07.2013),

Figure 2. Map of Georgia with the separatist territories (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adjara).

БОЕВЫЕ ДЕЙСТВИЯ В ЮЖНОЙ ОСЕТИИ



Source: Портал ГЕОПОЛИТИКА. <<http://www.geopolitica.ru/map/karty-kavkaza#.Uuu10NHxtD8>>, (12.09.2013)

Figure 5. Combat operations in South Ossetia, 08–09 August 2008.



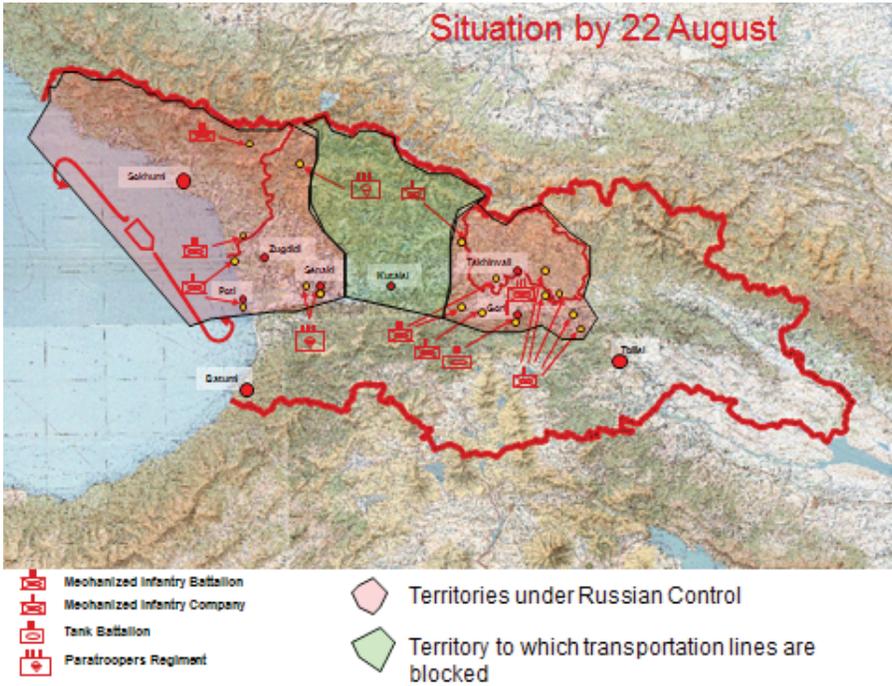
Source: Russia-Georgia war. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia%E2%80%93Georgia_war>, (20.09.2013).

Figure 6. The Russian counteroffensive from the 10th to 12th of August 2008.



Source: Пятидневная война. Журнал „Власть“, № 32(785), 18.08.2008.

Figure 7. Russian military activities in the August war.



Source: Russia-Georgia war maps. <<https://www.google.com>>, (27.09.2013).

Figure 8. Georgian territory under Russian control by 22 August 2008.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



General (retired) **Ants Laaneots** was born on 16 January 1948 in Kilingi-Nõmme, Estonia.

In July 1966, he entered the Higher Military School in Kharkov, Ukraine, and graduated in 1970 as a tank officer. From 1970 to 1978, he served as a platoon leader, company commander and battalion commander of the 300th Tank Regiment for the Soviet Army in Ukraine. From 1978 to 1981, General Laaneots studied in the Malinovsky Armoured and Mechanized Forces Academy in Moscow. From 1981 to 1987, he was posted to the Soviet-Chinese border in Eastern Kazakhstan. During this assignment he served as the Chief of Staff of the 96th Tank Regiment, two years as the Commander of the 180th Tank Regiment, and three years as the Deputy Commander-Chief of Staff of the 78th Armoured Division. From 1987 to 1989, he deployed to Ethiopia where he spent one year as the military advisor to the commander of an infantry division, and a year and a half as the military advisor to the commanding general of an Ethiopian army corps participating in combat activities. Before his resignation from the Soviet Army in September 1991, he served as the Chief of Regional Defence District in Tartu, Estonia.

After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, General Laaneots served two times as the Chief of the General Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces – from 1991 to 1994, and from 1997 to 1999. From 1994 to 1996 he was in reserve and in 1997 General Laaneots was appointed to the position of Inspector General of the Defence Forces. During his second tenure, in 1998, he graduated from the NATO Defence College in Rome, Italy. In 1998, he was promoted to Major General. In 2000, after completing the Higher Command Course in the Finnish National Defence College, he was appointed the head of the Baltic Defence Research Centre located in Estonia. From September 2001 through December 2006, he was Commandant of the Estonian National Defence College, and the Chief of Defence from 2006 to 2011. In 2008 he was promoted to Lieutenant General, and in 2011 to General.

After retirement in 2011, he was the National Defence Advisor to the Prime Minister from 2011 to 2013. General Laaneots has been a Member of the Estonian Parliament since March 2014, and is currently serving as the Deputy Chairman of the National Defence Committee. He is an active member of the Estonian National Defence League and the Rotary Club.

His main research interests include modern conflicts, conflicts involving small states/nations, and development of national defence.

