

As ceasefire takes hold

# Imperialist hypocrisy over war in Georgia

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13 August 2008

Fighting has largely subsided between Russian and Georgian troops, following the declaration of a halt in hostilities by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. He made the announcement in Moscow after ceasefire talks with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who represented the European Union.

Sarkozy then flew to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, where Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili agreed to the same ceasefire terms, including a pull-back of Russian troops to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and an end to Georgian military operations against both territories, nominally part of Georgia but autonomous and under Russian protection since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The five-day war has revealed the extremely tense state of international relations, posing the danger of a direct conflict between major powers for the first time since the end of the Cold War. It has also underscored the complete hypocrisy of the Bush administration and the American media, which have vilified Russia for military actions that are dwarfed by the ongoing wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is nothing progressive about Russia's military intervention in Georgia. The Russian ruling elite is pursuing its own predatory aims in the Caucasus, a region that was ruled for two centuries by Moscow before the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the main force behind the eruption of the crisis in the Caucasus is US imperialism, which has carried out a provocative policy aimed at supplanting Russia in that country's former spheres of influence in order to establish American hegemony over the Eurasian land mass. A central instrument in this policy has been the pro-American Saakashvili regime, which came to power in 2004 in the US-engineered "Rose Revolution."

Georgia initiated the current conflict with its sudden assault last week on South Ossetia, which included a devastating artillery attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of the region, in which as many as 2,000 people may have been killed. The overwhelming Russian response, including hundreds of tanks and fighter jets, quickly routed the Georgian military forces.

The two governments traded charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia. Tens of thousands of Ossetians—a population distinct from Georgians in language and culture—fled into the Russian territory of North Ossetia, just across the international border, seeking to escape the violence.

Refugees told journalists that there were hundreds, if not thousands, killed in the initial Georgian attack on their homeland,

and that Georgian troops had killed civilians indiscriminately. An aid worker told the Associated Press that the road from Tskhinvali "was full of bodies, whole families died there, children, the elderly." Another described a Georgian plane bombing a column of fleeing refugees. A Reuters reporter found at least 200 people being treated for bullet wounds in Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia.

The Georgian government filed charges with the International Court of Justice in The Hague, claiming that Ossetian fighters were carrying out atrocities against Georgian villages and portraying these attacks as part of a pattern of "ethnic cleansing" backed by Russia. The Georgian health minister put the death toll in his country at 175—suggesting that media reports of a Russian "blitz" were exaggerated—while UN officials estimated that 100,000 people have been forced from their homes on both sides.

Saakashvili declared a unilateral ceasefire Sunday, as soon as the scale of the military debacle became clear. But Russian forces ignored this declaration, pushing ahead to destroy Georgian military facilities just outside the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in the towns of Gori and Senaki.

Russian President Medvedev said Russian troops had inflicted "very significant losses" and left the Georgian military "disorganized." Press accounts confirmed that there was little to differentiate retreating Georgian soldiers and civilians fleeing the Russian advance. Georgian troops abandoned armored vehicles, supplies and even their helmets and weapons in their panic, suggesting that there would have been little sustained resistance to a Russian push into the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

However, Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and high-ranking military officers have repeatedly declared since Sunday that they had no intention of carrying out such an action.

There have undoubtedly been back-channel assurances to the European Union, NATO and the United States that the Russian military incursion had aims limited only to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This did not stem the apocalyptic rhetoric from the Bush administration, the US media, or Saakashvili. The Georgian president went on state television to accuse Russia of the "preplanned, cold-blooded... murder of a small country."

With the shooting halted, at least for the time being, it is worth reflecting on the hysterical tenor of the Western media, particularly in the United States, which have repeatedly compared the Russian military operation to Hitler's assault on Czechoslovakia in 1938, the Soviet invasion of the same country

in 1968, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The general thrust of these commentaries is that the United States must resume something like the Cold War against an expansionist Russia. The *New York Times*, in an editorial Tuesday, declared, “Moscow claims it is merely defending the rights of ethnic minorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been trying to break from Georgia since the early 1990s. But its ambitions go far beyond that. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin... appears determined to reimpose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with.”

The newspaper demands, “The United States and its European allies must tell Mr. Putin in the clearest possible terms that such aggression will not be tolerated. And that there will be no redivision of Europe.”

The *Wall Street Journal*, in an editorial headlined “Vladimir Bonaparte,” demanded a series of actions that would lead to a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia, the countries with the world’s two biggest nuclear arsenals, including enrolling Georgia and Ukraine in NATO and beginning an airlift of military aid to Tbilisi.

An op-ed column in the *Journal*, written by Josef Joffe, editor of the conservative German daily *Die Zeit*, underscored the strategic and economic interests underlying the conflict. According to Joffe, Abkhazia and Ossetia, however obscure, “are the flash points of the 21st century’s Great Game, and the issue is: Who will gain control over the Caspian Basin, the richest depository of strategic resources next to the Middle East.”

One of the most strident anti-Russian voices was that of former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, a supporter of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. In comments to the British *Guardian* and the German *Die Welt*, he compared Putin to Hitler and Stalin, and the Russian intervention in Georgia to the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939. “Georgia is to an extent the Finland of today, both morally and strategically,” he claimed.

Like Joffe, Brzezinski pointed to the central role of oil, particularly the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline built over the last decade with US support to bring oil from the region to the world market, bypassing Russian territory. “If Georgia no longer has its sovereignty, it means... that the West is cut off from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia,” he said.

The strategists of US imperialism have broader interests than oil, however. Brzezinski himself has long sought the breakup, not only of the old Soviet Union, but of the Russian republic which comprises the bulk of the land mass of the former USSR. As the *Guardian* observed Monday, “The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is only a minor element in a much larger strategic equation: an attempt, sponsored largely by the United States but eagerly subscribed to by several of its new ex-Soviet allies, to reduce every aspect of Russian influence throughout the region, whether it be economic, political, diplomatic or military.”

The rhetorical onslaught over the Russo-Georgian crisis is particularly cynical given the record of the Bush administration. “Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state,” Bush declared Monday. “Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century.”

Actually, the record of the 21st century consists of little else, particularly for the government of the United States. Since it took

office in January 2001, the Bush administration has invaded and occupied two sovereign states, Afghanistan and Iraq, while supporting similar attacks by its client states: the invasion of Lebanon by Israel in 2006, the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia in 2007, and the invasion of Ecuador by Colombia earlier this year.

The contrast between US howls about “Russian aggression” in Georgia and its support for Israeli aggression in Lebanon is particularly instructive.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice notably dragged her feet on a ceasefire in the Lebanon conflict, visiting Beirut while Israeli tanks and warplanes were ravaging south Lebanon and rejecting the pleas of the US-backed Lebanese government to intervene. Israel had the right to secure its interests before being compelled to pull back, she argued. But in Georgia, Rice declared that a ceasefire was urgently needed and had to precede any other action.

The purpose of these bad faith arguments is as much domestic as international. The Bush administration seeks to stoke up an atmosphere reminiscent of the Cold War. This is widely viewed in right-wing circles as the only way to engineer a victory by Republican presidential candidate John McCain, under conditions where the Bush administration and the Republican Party are widely hated. (A poll published Tuesday found that 41 percent of Americans regarded Bush as the worst president in US history, while 68 percent wanted all US troops out of Iraq within a year).

The Bush administration wants the November election to be held in an environment of international crisis, so as to intimidate and divert popular opposition to the war in Iraq, Bush’s reactionary social policies and the deepening economic crisis. The idea is to have yet another “national security” election which will favor McCain, whose campaign is largely based on his military background and his supposed foreign policy experience.

The Democrats, including their presidential candidate Barack Obama, are scrambling to match the provocative and confrontational rhetoric of the Bush administration and McCain, denouncing Russia in similar terms and echoing the Bush administration’s demand that Georgia be admitted to NATO—something Russia considers an intolerable threat to its security.

Slanted television news reports and articles in liberal (the *New York Times*) as well as conservative (the *Wall Street Journal*) newspapers that seek to whip up anti-Russian sentiment are designed to condition public opinion for a major escalation of Washington’s drive to establish US hegemony over the Caucasus and the oil-rich regions on its borders.



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